

WHERE WILL THE POOR PEOPLE GO? A LOOK
AT GENTRIFICATION THROUGH
THE LENS OF FAITH

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
DEDICATION	viii
ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
ABBREVIATIONS	x
INTRODUCTION	1
Definitions of Key Terms	2
The Project	3
CHAPTER	
1. MINISTRY FOCUS	7
Context.....	9
The Creation of Black Neighborhoods	12
Churches and Gentrification	13
Economic and Political Factors in Gentrification	18
2. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	26
Introduction.....	26
A Biblical Perspective on Gentrification	27

	Introduction to Deuteronomy 15.....	29
	An Economically Diverse Community	33
	Deuteronomy 15:11	38
	Conclusion	44
3.	HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS	48
	Introduction.....	48
	Welcome to Seneca Village	51
	Three Churches, One Village, All People, One God	59
	Hidden Communities	63
	Conclusion	66
4.	THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS	70
	Introduction.....	70
	Introduction to Liberation Theology.....	72
	Exodus 1:9–10	90
	Conclusion	92
5.	INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS.....	94
	Asbury Park before Gentrification.....	95
	The History of Redlining	96
	Cities on Fire.....	100
	Conclusion	108
6.	PROJECT ANALYSIS	115
	Introduction.....	115
	Methodology	116

Implementation	118
Interviews.....	120
Community Meetings.....	137
Summary of Learning	139
Conclusion	143
BIBLIOGRAPHY	149

ABSTRACT

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Gentrification is a rampant problem, causing displacement of poor people throughout the U.S. This research project hypothesizes that unification through investment in poor people is an effective means of redirecting gentrification. Methodologically, the researcher collected qualitative data on gentrification in two small cities—Asbury Park, NJ and Schenectady, NY—using surveys, interviews, and group sessions. The researcher surveyed thirty participants from each city (sixty total), interviewed two stakeholders from each city (four total), and held one open-invitation community meeting at a Historical Black Methodist Church (two total). Based on the data, the researcher proposed practical solutions to mitigate gentrification.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandparents, Daniel A. Harris Jr., Marion Hill Harris, Harold Bowens, Clara Bowens, and all my ancestors. My grandparents did not have the opportunity to graduate from high school. However, they encouraged me and all their grandchildren to attend college.

I also dedicate this work to my daughter, Emily Monique. I found out I was pregnant in the fifth semester of my doctoral program. Emily, you became my inspiration and my motivation to complete this program. Always remember you are brilliant, beautiful, and brave, and you are a child of God. We did it, baby girl!

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1	Survey for “A Look at Gentrification through the Lens of Faith”	118
2	Interview #1	120
3	Interview #2	123
4	Interview #3	128
5	Interview #4	131
6	Participant Demographics	138
7	Questions for Small Group Discussion.....	138

Tables

1	Responses According to Gender	139
2	Responses According to Ethnicity	140
3	Responses According to Neighborhood Type	141
4	Responses According to Familiarity with Gentrification	141
5	Responses According to Impact of Gentrification	142
6	Responses According to Beliefs about Gentrification	142

ABBREVIATIONS

ACSA	At-Home Community Separation Anxiety
A.M.E. Zion	African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
FHA	Federal Housing Administration
HBMC	Historical Black Methodist Churches
SCAP	Schenectady Community Action Programs

INTRODUCTION

Many neighborhoods throughout the United States are experiencing gentrification. The Urban Displacement Project defines gentrification as “A process of neighborhood change that includes economic change in a historically disinvested neighborhood—by means of real estate investment and new higher-income residents moving in, as well as demographic change—not only in terms of income level, but also in terms of changes in the education level or racial make-up of residents.”¹ While community development is needed in many poverty-stricken areas, something must be done about the displacement of poor people. I believe a different approach can be taken with community redevelopment that will not result in displacement. This innovative approach should be led by community leaders; faith-based leaders in particular. The fights for the rights of poor and working-class people should always be at the forefront of the work of faith communities and advocates.

Religious leaders cannot afford to ignore the impacts of gentrification. As Nadia Mian states, “Religious organizations are faced with an identity crisis as gentrification transforms the urban landscape. They face economic challenges as the cost of real estate

¹ Karen Chapple, Tim Thomas, and Miriam Zuk, “What Are Gentrification and Displacement,” Urban Displacement Project, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/about/what-are-gentrification-and-displacement/>.

risers.”² Max Weber adds, “Old religious dogmas are challenged by the influx of new dwellers that predominantly emphasize rationalization and diminish the emphasis on traditional belief systems.”³ Churches, especially Historical Black Methodist Churches (HBMC) find themselves at the center of this crisis. HBMCs are often located in a community that was once a thriving industrial and residential area for African Americans. These churches were established in neighborhoods safe for Black Americans migrating across the United States during the 1900s following the Emancipation Proclamation. Job opportunities for skilled and unskilled workers were plentiful; therefore, the working poor were able to make a living for themselves and their families. These are the areas prime for gentrification today. The churches in these areas were once the central locations for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and now they can be the heart of the Unification Not Gentrification Movement.

Definitions of Key Terms

Historical Black Methodist Church (HBMC)

A Methodist church or denomination that came into existence in the late 1700s or 1800s due to racial discrimination experienced in white churches. This term refers to the A.M.E, A.M.E. Zion, and C.M.E Church.

² Nadia Mian, “‘Prophets-for-Profits’: Redevelopment and the Altering Urban Religious Landscape,” *Urban Studies* 45, no. 10 (2008): 2143–2161, cited in Orvic Pada, “The Impact of Gentrification on Faith-Based Organizations,” *Justice, Spirituality and Education* (2015): 46.

³ Max Weber and Guenther Roth, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), cited in Orvic Pada, “The Impact of Gentrification on Faith-Based Organizations,” *Justice, Spirituality and Education* (2015): 46.

Gentrification

The process whereby the character of a poor urban area is changed by wealthier people moving in, improving housing, and attracting new businesses, typically displacing current inhabitants in the process.⁴

At-Home Community Separation Anxiety (ACSA)

A state of mind when a person becomes extremely uneasy when their hometown, community, or native land changes around them and becomes unrecognizable. Although they have not left the community, they feel unwelcome at home.

Social Disruption

“Social and psychological dislocation associated with the alteration or breakdown of social life in small rural communities that may occur as a result of rapid economic and demographic change with rapid industrial and natural resource development.”⁵

The Project

The title of my project is “Where Will the Poor People Go? A Look at Gentrification through the Lens of Faith.” I conducted research and collected data in Asbury Park, New Jersey and Schenectady, New York, both of which are undergoing

⁴ John R. Nolan, “Gentrification: Remedies and Consequences,” *Green Law: Blog of the Pace Environmental Law Programs* (blog), accessed March 6, 2023, <https://greenlaw.blogs.pace.edu/2022/01/13/gentrification-remedies-and-consequences/#:~:text=Gentrification%20is%20defined%20as%20%E2%80%9Cthe,in%20many%20communities%20are%20manifest.>

⁵ “Glossary Term: Social Disruption,” Solar Energy Development Program EIS Information Center, accessed February 23, 2023, https://solareis.anl.gov/glossacro/dsp_wordpopup.cfm?word_id=5228.

redevelopment or gentrification. Disinvested neighborhoods and historically Black neighborhoods are often one and the same. These neighborhoods are also the locations of many HBMCs. Therefore, it may come as no surprise that an HBMC, depending on where it is located, can be adversely affected by gentrification. Where do the residents of these communities and the members of these churches go after they are displaced? What can community faith leaders in partnership with other leaders do to address this issue?

Through this research, it is my goal to develop a book and training module to teach ways to stop the cycle of displacing people while unifying communities. It will be important to effectively communicate to key community stakeholders the benefits of unification. The training will aim specifically to resource community leaders, teaching them how to unify rather than gentrify urban communities. I began this project by tracing the roots of gentrification to its historical and biblical foundations.

Chapter 1

The first chapter explores my experience of growing up in a disinvested community, pre-gentrification. Here, I will also introduce the concept of reverse white flight and the return of affluent residents to the city. This chapter will explore the negatives and positives of this occurrence and correlate it to the biblical story in Deuteronomy 15.

Chapter 2

Chapter two provides the biblical foundation of this project, which will focus on the story of the Israelites returning to Canaan as told in Deuteronomy 15. This chapter should end with the question, where are the Canaanites today? Was their history buried and why?

Chapter 3

Chapter three provides the historical foundation for this study through the story of Seneca Village in New York City. Before Central Park was even thought of, there was Seneca Village. Situated between the park's West 82nd and West 89th Streets, it was a community of largely African American property owners. By 1855, the village was comprised of approximately 225 residents. One-third of the village was made up of Irish immigrants, and there was a small number of German occupants. This community was taken from the residents by eminent domain and destroyed to make way for Central Park.

Chapter 4

Chapter four provides the theological foundation for the study, centered on Liberation Theology. If God is the God of the oppressed, as expressed by James Cone, faith leaders as ambassadors of Christ need to advocate for the poor. Freedom is the message in this chapter.

Chapter 5

Chapter five provides an interdisciplinary discussion that includes Urban Studies, which allowed me to take a more in-depth look at the design of Asbury Park, Schenectady, and Seneca Village. This approach provided data from the vantage point of sociology, geography, economics, political science, and urban design and planning. The data can help to answer the question does gentrification have to be a metamorphosis of colonization?

Chapter 6

Finally, chapter six provides a project analysis. First, I collected data on Asbury Park, New Jersey, and Schenectady, New York to prove that these communities have

been gentrified or are moving in the direction of gentrification. Then, with the proper consent, I surveyed residents to discover how the changes in the community have affected them. Following the surveys, I scheduled interviews to further explore the changes in the community, both positive and negative. The last step was to have community meetings by invitation. In the invitation-only meetings we discussed the newfound data and possible next steps.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

I grew up in Asbury Park, New Jersey, a small urban city on the Jersey Shore. From my observation, it was unlike any other beach town in the county—mostly because Asbury Park was quiet. To those on the outside looking in, it was often described as desolate. Although some considered Asbury Park a deserted wasteland, I knew otherwise. How could it be unoccupied? In 1980, the year I was born, there were a little over seventeen thousand people residing in Asbury Park. By the 1990s that number had dwindled down to 16,799. The city had taken a downturn after an event that some describe as a riot (others define it as an uprising), which occurred in the summer of 1970. Ten years before I was born, my parents lived through some of the city’s darkest days. As Daniel Weeks noted, “the long, hot summer had finally come to the resort city of Asbury Park, New Jersey, which in July 1970 was rocked by four days of rioting.”¹ Sadly, race riots in the United States in the 1970s were not an anomaly, and the picturesque beach town of Asbury Park was unable to escape it.

Being raised in a city following a race riot has influenced my ministry interests more than anything else. I had not realized it until recently, but walking the streets as a

¹ Daniel Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt: Asbury Park in July 1970,” *New Jersey Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016): 80, <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.49>.

child in the post-riot environment gave me vision I would not appreciate until now. I grew up amongst the remnant of residents and businesses that were brave enough to stay in town. So many industries and white residents fled the area. I vividly remember walking the halls of my high school wondering where the white people had gone. When I was in elementary school I had a few white classmates, but by the time I got to high school there were fewer than twenty-five white students in the entire school. There were pictures in the first-floor hallways that highlighted each graduating class. The high school was founded in 1926, and year after year there was a noticeable difference in the makeup of the classes. Every year there were fewer white faces in the photographs. I wanted to know why. Growing up in a town where streets were lined with boarded up businesses formed an inquisitive young mind. I not only wanted to know where the white people had gone; I wanted to know why they left. Where were they now, and would they ever return?

This experience transfers over to my ministry interest in several ways. I desperately want to see communities restored and unified. I have only pastored in urban community settings, and I tend to understand the plight of my parishioners from my own lived experience. I presently reside in a parsonage that is situated in the heart of the “hood.” Previous pastors had opted to live outside of the neighborhood, but I am most familiar with neighborhoods like this one. Placing me in the heart of the hood is like throwing Br’er Rabbit into a briar patch. To date, I have served in Asbury Park, Lakewood, and Atlantic City, New Jersey, and I presently pastor in Schenectady, New York. All these areas once had thriving Black communities. These metropolises were culturally diverse, yet these were areas where Black Americans thrived even during the Civil Rights movement. Now, these cities are prone to the latest form of oppressive

subjugation, and it is called gentrification. My project included extensive research on gentrification and the displacement of long-time residents. It is more than a topic that piques my interest; it is the reality that I am presently living. Every congregation I have served, whether as an associate minister or senior pastor, has had members displaced as a result of gentrification. As a child I wanted to see white people return to town and experience cultural diversity in my neighborhood again; however, I did not know white people returning would mean the displacement of Black residents.²

Context

My churchgoing experience has been exclusively in the Black Church. I first held membership at a historically Black Baptist Church that was first attended by my paternal grandparents. For several years, Second Baptist Church of Asbury Park was a main hub for the African American Community. It became a haven for Black residents who identified as Christians.

In 1885, Black parishioners left First Baptist Church, a predominately White church in the city, to form their own congregation. The founding of historical Black institutions always has comparable beginnings. A group of Black members who had been worshipping at First Baptist decided they no longer had to deal with discriminatory treatment. The pastor of First Baptist Church at the time, Rev. Frank C. Colby, gave his

² Stephanie Brown, "Beyond Gentrification: Strategies for Guiding the Conversation and Redirecting the Outcomes of Community Transition," Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies and NeighborWorks America, July 18, 2014, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research-areas/working-papers/beyond-gentrification-strategies-guiding-conversation-and-redirecting>.

blessings and officially parted ways with the Black members.³ My late grandparents Daniel Harris Jr. and Marion Hill Harris joined the church in the 1940s under the leadership of Rev. Dr. John A. Ashby. Ashby served the church faithfully for thirty-four years.

It should come as no surprise that my experience has been rooted in the Black church. I grew up in Asbury Park at a time when the population was made up of mostly Black residents; a little over eighty percent. Historical Black Churches have always been a staple in historical Black communities. The gentrification of communities has had adverse effects on historical Black institutions and businesses, and the church is no exception.⁴ Frankly, gentrification has contributed to the decline in Black church attendance. Perhaps the Black church is not dying; maybe it is being separated.

Congregants can no longer afford to live in the neighborhoods their families have called home for decades, sometimes centuries. As property taxes and rent skyrocket, long-time residents have no choice but to relocate. When they are forced to move out of town, they struggle to duplicate the sense of community they had in their hometown. Oftentimes, it is never recreated.

Historical Black Churches could always be found in the middle of Black communities and within walking distance for good reasons. Places outside of the neighborhood were not always safe or welcoming. This common struggle created community that was both geographical and relational. Community is not just a place

³ “About Us,” Second Baptist Church of Asbury Park, NJ, accessed January 5, 2022, www.sbcapnj.org/about-us/#:~:text=Our%20History.

⁴ Chantel McHenry and John Faison, “The Impacts of Gentrification on the Black Church with Pastor John Faison,” February 24, 2021, in *Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast*, podcast, YouTube video, 38:33, <https://youtu.be/V6U0WaX4gZM>.

where you find yourself physically. An article titled “Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory” by David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, cites work by Sociologist Joseph R. Gusfield, who “distinguished between two major uses of the term community. The first is the territorial and geographical notion of community—neighborhood, town, city. The second is ‘relational,’ concerned with ‘quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location.’”⁵ Community is essential for a person to be psychologically healthy. This is the reason immigrants often gravitate to communities where they can find their culture and feel safe. It is a place where they can find things they can relate to such as food, language, and traditions, and thus community is created.

I presently serve as Pastor of the oldest African American Church in the city of Schenectady, New York.⁶ We are in what is historically the multiracial working-class section of town called Hamilton Hill. From what I have heard, Hamilton Hill was once full of Black, Italian, and Irish families. Most of the Black families in the city lived in this neighborhood. I was not surprised at all when I took a ride around the area and saw a plethora of multifamily houses. Many of my parishioners live in multifamily homes. It is a culture and community to which I can relate. For the sake of affordability, my family has lived in multifamily homes since my grandparents’ generation.

Community can happen organically. However, sometimes people are pushed together intentionally and for iniquitous reasons. Black people lived together, worked

⁵ David McMillan and David Chavis, “Sense of Community: Definition and Theory,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986): 8.

⁶ Marsha Mortimore, *The Early African American Presence in the City and County of Schenectady* (n.p., 2014).

together, worshipped together, and struggled together. Yet, the way Black communities were formed resulted from discriminatory practices.

The Creation of Black Neighborhoods

Many Black communities in the United States derived from Black settlements that were formed after the Civil War. Practices such as redlining and unfair bank lending procedures attributed to the creation of these communities. Residential segregation has a strong, well documented history in this country. While it can be said that Black Americans were forced into crowded cities and undesirable quarters, it should also be noted that some African Americans wanted their own racially separate communities. Yes, unfair banking practices and some government policies were racist and had harmful effects on the Black community for generations. It especially hindered our ability to create generational wealth. These communities, whether formed or forced, grew rapidly. The initial surge of Black migration came in the late 1870s as Reconstruction was ending. Regardless of how the communities came into existence, they survived and even thrived for decades.

They were not the wealthiest communities in the country, but for many of us they were home—despite what others thought, it was enough. Enough to encourage many of us to be first-generation college students. It was enough to propel many of us to success. Some of America’s most successful business executives, politicians, entertainers, philanthropists, doctors, educators and more come from these communities. The age-old question that was asked about Jesus in the Gospel of John 1:46 was inquired of us children from the “ghettos” of America: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can

anything good come out of Asbury Park? Can anything good come out of the projects in Brooklyn? Can anything good come out of an impoverished community? Can anything good come out of dirt roads and back alleys? The answer, of course, is yes. We, the children raised in these communities, always knew that there were improvements needed in our towns and cities. Yet, we also knew that our neighborhoods were not all together bad. We were the beauty amongst the ashes, the roses that grew from the concrete. We recognized our disenfranchised communities as a canvas to be worked with, not a depressed structure to demolish. We understood that redevelopment was needed, but gentrification is not redevelopment. Redevelopment is comprehensive and inclusive, but gentrification has proven to be anything but that. The displacement of longtime residents from Black communities is an atrocity at the hands of government, investors, and developers. Poor people are not collateral damage; they were the intended target. It is an issue that communities of faith can no longer afford to be silent about. For it is our parishioners that are being displaced and pushed out of town.

Churches and Gentrification

I was not pushed out of East Orange, New Jersey, the city where I purchased my first house. I voluntarily moved. After spending six years in North Jersey, I decided to go back home to Asbury Park. At first, I considered looking for an apartment. I wanted nothing too extravagant, as I was a single woman with no children, so a studio or one-bedroom would have been suitable. However, the more I looked, the more apparent it became that the cost of living in Asbury Park had changed. In fact, the cost of living throughout the entire county had increased astronomically. Fortunately for me, my father

and uncle owned property in the area and were willing to rent me an apartment below market value. I moved into a studio apartment and paid my father rent.

I immediately started looking for a new church to attend. I considered returning to Second Baptist Church with my father, who had started going back regularly now that he was working fewer hours. He no longer had to work three jobs to pay my college tuition and had become more active in church. However, before I decided to attend with my father, an acquaintance of mine invited me to his church to sing. After only three months, I found myself joining the church. It was only a few months after becoming a member of St. John African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church that I delivered my trial sermon, and within two years I became a licensed Methodist preacher. A girl who grew up in the Baptist Church, who then recommitted her life to Christ and attended a Pentecostal Church for six years, somehow became a Methodist preacher and now pastor.

St. John Church was a small Black church that was also in the middle of a town that was being gentrified. In most gentrification situations, those being displaced represent one demographic and the gentrifiers represent another. I do not want to place a broad label on those with the means to purchase property in a depressed environment, or, as it is called in real estate, an emerging community. However, for whatever reason, those with means seem to be from one group and those without are from another. In Lakewood, it was the Black community that was being displaced and Orthodox Jewish community that was moving in and quickly buying up all the property. There was even a failed plot to buy our church. Members of the church began to murmur about men from the Orthodox community showing up to their homes with cash on hand offering to pay for their houses. A “for sale” sign did not need to be posted in the yard for such an offer to be

made. In fact, I remember reading in the paper that an ordinance had to be issued by the city forbidding such practices.

At the time, I really did not know what redevelopment or gentrification was, but it was clear to me that, like Asbury Park, the cost of living and the culture in Lakewood were about to change. I did not know the effects it would have on the community and the church, but I intimately understood the plight of the members of the church. They feared that they would soon not be able to live in their beloved hometown. Many of the members of the church had grown up in Lakewood. Things were changing around them, and it was obvious they were not a part of the new direction the town was taking.

If my family did not own multifamily houses in Asbury Park, I would not have been able to afford to live in the town where I grew up. The condominiums that were going up were clearly for the upper echelon. I could not afford two thousand dollars a month for a one-bedroom apartment, and I did not know anyone that could. I could not afford to live in the city where I grew up, and soon I would not be able to afford to live in the place where I worshipped. If it were not for the generosity of my parents, I would have been displaced. Therefore, as a pastor, I empathize so much with my members who have been displaced or are facing displacement.

Today, I look out at my congregation in Schenectady, New York and I know the new apartment buildings going up around our church will likely be out of their price range. I am not sure if I should caution them or march down to city hall and demand a meeting with the mayor. Perhaps I should meet with some of the developers and learn their vision for the city. Yet, part of me feels like I already know the plans, so why ask? There should be a way to redirect gentrification. It is my hope that communities can unify

rather than gentrify. There must be a way to keep the community affordable for the poor, or, as the Bible states, “the least of these.” Does the character of an urban neighborhood changing and wealthier people moving in mean that poor people must move out? My prayer is that the answer is no and that my project will work towards the end of the displacement of poor people.

Shortly after I became the Pastor of Duryee Memorial Church in Schenectady, one of our most faithful members experienced displacement. She had been living in a duplex for years. She moved to Schenectady with her husband over two decades ago and raised her two daughters in her house there. After her husband died, she applied for housing assistance and was approved for Section 8. Section 8 is part of the Housing Act of 1937. This act has been amended repeatedly over the years. However, the premise and intent remain the same. The Section 8 program provides rental assistance to landlords on behalf of low-income tenants. I went to visit this member several times, and she kept an immaculate home. She was now a single woman and, by all accounts, an excellent tenant. Her landlord who lived in the other part of the house told her that he needed her to move. The demand came without warning and was devastating for her. He gave her only a few months to find somewhere else to live. She was told that he wanted to move a family member into her apartment.

The church member desperately tried to find an apartment in Schenectady. The rent prices in the city have skyrocketed, and even with Section 8, she was unable to find a place to live. She had family members in Virginia who invited her to move down there. They offered her employment taking care of her elderly aunt and uncle. Reluctantly, she moved out of state. During the pandemic, our church became virtual and she was elated

to be able to still attend church online. She did not want to leave the neighborhood or her church, but circumstances made it impossible for her to stay. Adding insult to injury, weeks after she moved out, a for-rent sign went up in the window.

We are not sure why the landlord was not honest with her. He did not move a family member in as he suggested. He advertised the apartment for more than what he was getting in rent from our member. Why didn't he simply tell her that he wanted to raise the rent? He presumed she would not be able to afford it. Now, I am pastoring a displaced member, and she is not the only one.

The rise of rent is one of the effects of gentrification. However, it could be argued that this is not solely happening in gentrified communities. Skyrocketing rent prices are taking the nation by storm. The Washington Post reported, "rents continue to rise at the fastest pace in decades, making housing costlier than ever for many Americans. Nationally, rents rose a record 11.3 percent last year, according to real estate research firm CoStar Group. That fast pace of growth remained elevated in the first months of 2022, as many parts of the country continued to notch double-digit jumps in rent prices."⁷ Rents continue to rise across the nation, and yet debate continues in government chambers over a raise in minimum wage. This is the reality of many of the congregants at my church. This is the reality I was dealing with when my salary as a certified teacher would not cover the cost of living in Asbury Park.

Where are working class people supposed to live if the cost of living is rising but salaries are not? This is a grave injustice and I believe faith leaders should be at the

⁷ Abha Bhattari, Chris Alcantara, and Andrew Van Dam, "Rents Are Rising Everywhere: See How Much Prices Are Up in Your Area," *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), April 22, 2022.

forefront of this fight. We, more than any other vocation, are called to care for the marginalized.

Economic and Political Factors in Gentrification

The Gospel of Luke 4:18 says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” Jesus was quoting from the Prophet Isaiah and of course referring to himself. Jesus came with a special message for the poor. He was the good news, the gospel message that they needed. The marginalized desperately needed to know that someone cared for them. Jesus showed them that he cared through his actions, and we must still do the same.

It is detrimental to the community when faith leaders choose to be silent on issues that affect the most vulnerable. Pastors and faith leaders must speak up on the issue of the displacement of the poor. If not, they may lose their congregation, church buildings, and the respect of the community. When I go to organizing meetings with other activists addressing the problems with gentrification, I am often the only clergy member there. I was baffled by this for a long time. Where were the pastors? It was their members who were being affected. It did not take me long to learn that some pastors were absent from the meetings because it did not serve their interest. Some pastors were invited to the city planning meetings instead. They understood that they had to stay in the good graces of the local elected officials and power brokers in order to receive certain funding. What they may have failed to see at the time is that government funding is not everlasting. The well can always run dry and an alliance with money rarely if ever equates to an alliance

with God. It is as the scripture says, “you cannot serve both God and money.” It is not wise to put too much stock into local politics and business during the time of a city’s redevelopment and lose oneself in the process. Elected officials can be replaced every two to four years on average. Yet, God is on the throne eternally. For this and many other reasons we need to be faithful to God alone. When we stop advocating for the poor and serving the least of these, whom are we really serving?

Long before grants were readily available to churches, it was the church members who sustained the ministry. They were the ones who sacrificed their time, money, and resources to keep the doors of the building open. Yes, it is true that we must figure out other ways to meet the financial obligations of ministry these days. I have been to many workshops where it has been explained that members are not giving as they used to. Churches are no longer sustainable solely from tithes and offerings. So, pastors and church leaders find themselves in a quandary. Churches could benefit from the economic recovery in the community. However, what if that surge in the economy comes at the detriment of our members? Sitting back and watching the community transform into a place that is not conducive, welcoming, or affordable for your parishioners is a form of betrayal. Additionally, there is no guarantee that the influx of new residents to the area will be inclined to join or even visit a church.

It would be incredible if we could pull all our members out of poverty. We could try to prepare them for the pending change coming to the community and encourage them to become entrepreneurs and property owners. Even if we did start programs at our churches with these kinds of initiatives, the likelihood that all our members would be ready in time is slim. Inevitably, someone would miss the boat and find themselves

priced out of the neighborhood. In fact, the way gentrification moves indicates that the change was occurring far before any of the residents could be cautioned. This is one of the reasons that faith and community leaders need to stand with their ears to the doors of city hall and elsewhere. We need to know what is going on before it happens. We as clergy need to bring our voices to the table and advocate for the poor before they are displaced.

From the onset of this research project, I needed to study the various outcomes of gentrification. Of course, there are positive effects, and it benefited my research to study those as well. It would be ideal if we could figure out ways to keep the positive outcomes while redirecting the negatives. Pastors of Historical Black Churches are not experiencing this phenomenon in isolation. We can learn from each other's experiences.

To get a broader perspective I interviewed different stakeholders beyond just the Black Church. I interviewed faith leaders, community organizers, longtime residents, newer residents, developers, and politicians. Politicians and developers tend to be reluctant to talk about gentrification; however, my goal was to make them see the value in my research. One assumption of this research was that politicians could see the positives more than the negatives of gentrification. Gentrification brings in affluent residents to the community. These newer residents can hopefully bring the kind of changes to the area that would improve their chances at reelection. It is helpful when incumbents can report that the economy is improving and crime is on the decline during their tenure. The poorer residents who voted to get them elected become an afterthought. The new residents vote and have the means to donate to campaigns. When politicians initially run for office, they usually have the best of intentions. They always promote that

they intend to represent all residents in the community if elected to serve. In a way, gentrification calls them to the carpet on that claim. If poor people are a part of a politician's constituency, the ethical thing to do would be to think of solutions to stop displacement. Politicians alone should not offer solutions. All the stakeholders mentioned previously must be included in the conversation and development of the solutions.

Another assumption of this research was that the developers would be apprehensive about interviewing with me because all the parties listed may benefit the most from gentrification. The concept of retaining the low-income population may be a bad business move for them. The selling point for investing in an emerging community is that there will be a turning point where real estate will be more profitable. Newer residents can afford the inflated cost of living. It may be possible to produce solutions to displacement without having developers at the table; however, the reason I would want developers involved from the onset is because I think it would offer a missing perspective, a perspective I have not seen before in this arena. Usually, community organizers that plan around this issue plan to confront the developers. I do not want to confront them. Instead, I want to partner with them if possible.

When setting out to study this topic, I anticipated that I would run across issues other than displacement. In order to remain focused on the one problem of gentrification, I informed the participants that we are solely dedicated to reversing this one outcome. When other issues arose that the group felt were important, I did not ignore them. Instead, we planned meetings that occurred outside this project to discuss other issues. The main objective was to bring people together around this one issue. The six weeks allowed for this project will not permit us to tackle other elements.

The six-week window will also not allow us to fully implement the solutions we produce, at least not to the degree where I would be able to observe the outcomes. This project will offer results from our conversations, surveys, and interviews only. The resolutions that come from these conversations will have to be fully implemented in the future.

I believe this project will be a part of what will become my life's work. As a pastor in one of the oldest Black Church denominations in the world, it is likely that I will be appointed to another area that could use this information. I say this because of where our churches are typically located. The history of the communities we serve as African Methodist Episcopal Zion Pastors are comparable. I often have discussions with my colleagues across the country and most of us are facing this issue. Our members are being displaced and there seems to be little to nothing we can do about it. I, for one, am tired of seeing it. Yet, I am hopeful that it can be redirected.

At its core, this project is about helping people to learn to live together. I want to equip leaders in faith communities with tools to help people unify rather than gentrify. The divide as I see it is not so much between Black people and white people as much as it is between poor people and wealthy people. I often hear people from poorer communities say as adults, "when we were growing up, we didn't know we were poor." This is because poor people may not have had much, but they had each other. They struggled financially, but still found a way to be happy. They did what they could with their communities. Asbury Park, New Jersey pieced itself back together after a riot in the seventies. After the riot, there were not as many thriving businesses in the area. There was a community center that the residents immediately worked to reopen so that the

children would have somewhere to go. There were churches that still stood after the ashes were cleared, there to serve the people. To some, Asbury Park did not seem like much to brag about, but we were proud to be from there. Fast forward twenty years later, developers and investors came into town and told us that what we built from the ashes was not good enough. They made promises to improve things and failed to inform us that we were not a part of the future they were building. The wealth gap in America was not something we really thought about until the wealthy moved in and we were forced to move out. Faith and unity should be something that transcends economic classes. For this reason, I want to equip faith leaders. Finally, we can learn to live together and see each other's worth.

The research in this project is a continuation of the work done by pastor and author Mark E. Strong and journalist P.E. Moskowitz. Gentrification is not a new problem. Churches and their pastors have been dwelling amidst the changes in their communities, failing to thrive and co-exist with the unfamiliar culture that has arrived in the neighborhood. The arrival of gentrification in any city started well before it was noticeable. In his book *How to Kill a City, Gentrification, Inequality and The Fight for the Neighborhood*, Peter Moskowitz talks about the begins of gentrification in New York City. He notes, "Most people put the start of New York City's gentrification, its phase zero in the 1970s or 1980s when the city nearly went bankrupt thanks to a declining industrial sector and white flight. But in fact, New York's policy makers have for nearly 100 years been planting the seeds for a rich real estate focused anti-industrial city."⁸ The

⁸ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018), 7.

same can be said about other cities throughout the world. The cities were designed to eventually push out the poor. However, with more and more areas being gentrified, soon no place will be affordable for the poor or the middle class. Most people will be living paycheck to paycheck or shoved into the few affordable spaces that remain.

In many communities, gentrification has already occurred, Asbury Park being a prime example. Mark E. Strong offers his book *Who Moved My Neighborhood?* as a resource to help wounded congregations heal. He talks about a reconciliation that needs to happen in order to move forward. Strong writes, “the reconciliation phase of the process is where we and our church come to terms with the fact that our neighborhood has moved. Although we’ve suffered and may be still suffering deep grief over our loss somehow, we are able to find a place of peace so that we can begin to move forward. By God’s grace we are now able to get up off the mat stand back up on our feet and move toward forging a new reality for our church in our new neighborhood.”⁹ Strong focuses his work on reconciliation, whereas I am focusing my work on redirection.

I am focusing my work on redirection because gentrification has some positive elements to it. Restoring dilapidated homes and businesses can be positive. Businesses bring jobs to the community. However, restoring dilapidated homes can also push property taxes up.¹⁰ Figuring out a way to restore these communities without ousting its long-time residents will take work. The outcome would be the co-existence of residents from different economic groups—the working class and the wealthy living side by side.

⁹ Mark E. Strong, *Who Moved My Neighborhood?* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 66.

¹⁰ Lei Ding and Jackelyn Hwang, “Effects of Gentrification on Homeowners: Evidence from a Natural Experiment,” *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 83, no. 1 (July 2020): 103536. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2020.103536>.

I can imagine that heaven will look like this. People from different constructed groups will finally live together. No longer will we be divided by class, race, religion, or anything else. For this reason, it makes sense that faith leaders would work towards this end. Should it be our task to only try to get people to heaven, or should we try to also create a piece of heaven here on Earth? Teaching people to live together in peace and harmony is not a cliché; it is an objective and one of the primary reasons Jesus came to Earth. Overall, that is what this research is about, helping gentrified communities to unify.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The day before Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, he prophetically said these words to an audience in Memphis: “I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.”¹ King spoke these words on April 3, 1968, as if he knew the following day would be his last. Perhaps King instinctively knew that he had to work while it was day, for night was coming when no one could work. King traveled the world as a prophet for twenty years, having been ordained at the tender age of nineteen, delivering profound sermons and countless speeches. He was teaching us that love, not hate, would lead us to a better future. Like King, Moses delivered a series of speeches striving to teach stubborn people how to care for each other. Moses’ words recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy demonstrate the heart of a leader who understood he would not see the promised land; nevertheless, he wanted to assure the people he had led that they could get there, if only they would focus on God and keep God’s law.

Deuteronomy is one of the five books in the Old Testament influenced by Moses. The word “Deuteronomy is derived from the Hebrew word *eleh ha-devarim*, which

¹ The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, “MLK: I’ve Been to the Mountaintop!” August 19, 2015, YouTube video, 43:14, <https://youtu.be/gC6qxf3b3FI>.

means “these are the words.”² In Greek, the word “Deuteronomion” means “the second law.” This denotes that the writings in this book are essentially a re-telling of God’s laws. As Moses neared the end of his life, he purposely spent time reteaching God’s precepts to his beloved community, reminding them that if they kept God’s precepts, they would see God’s promises. He did not want them to repeat the mistakes their ancestors made.

The biblical foundation of this research will rest upon Deuteronomy 15. Chapter 15 offers laws that teach about justice and inclusivity. These laws teach us to honor God by how we treat others, specifically the poor among us. These laws require that we be compassionate and altruistic. We can learn to practice radical generosity in ways that lead to equity. If we could grasp the concept of unity in this biblical text, we can be an example of God’s love and wisdom to the world.³

A Biblical Perspective on Gentrification

Gentrification is defined as “a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents.”⁴ While it can be argued that the redevelopment of poverty-stricken areas is a positive thing, something must be said about the displacement of impoverished people. What should community, government and faith

² Edith Samuel, *Your Jewish Lexicon : Some Words and Phrases in Jewish Life and Thought in Hebrew and in English* (New York, NY: Union Of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁴ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Gentrification,” accessed November 18, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification>.

leaders do to ensure that poor people are not trampled upon in the name of redevelopment? How can we be fully inclusive in the revitalization of urban cities? The law as presented in Deuteronomy gives us some insight on how we can do this.

There are elements of gentrification that suggest that we are repeating the mistakes of our ancestors. This book is recommending that if we extensively study lessons from Deuteronomy, particularly lessons on how to treat the poor, we can redirect gentrification. We can unify rather than gentrify and finally learn to live together. Jesus, Moses, King, and the voices of prophets past and present are still trying to teach us how to treat each other and love each other. This lesson is best taught in how we care for the poor.

Let us get things right where our ancestors got it wrong. Gentrification does not have to be a metamorphosis of colonization. History could have played out differently if indigenous people were seen as beloved and sacred. What if European settlers had seen Native Americans as partners to be included rather than savages to be discarded? Society must stop bullying poor people and further marginalizing the marginalized. The future can all play out differently if we stop for a moment to reflect on how gentrification affects the most vulnerable. If we neglect to address gentrification now it will only show up again in the next generation.⁵ It will hold a new title but retain its definition, just as colonization showed up as gentrification. We must learn to care for those that Jesus refers to as “the least of these” or history is bound to repeat itself.

⁵ *City Rising*, season 1, episode 1, “Gentrification and Displacement: Impact,” produced and directed by Rita Baghdadi and Jeremiah Hammerling, aired September 13, 2017, on PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/video/gentrification-and-displacement-impact/>.

Introduction to Deuteronomy 15

The concept of community presented in Deuteronomy 15 is one of a debt-free society. Could you imagine if everyone in your neighborhood woke up tomorrow morning with all their loans forgiven and credit scores at eight hundred? The wealth gap would begin to diminish, and everyone would get a fresh start. I know the idea is farfetched; nonetheless, it is appealing. We know that no community is a utopia, and every country or society has its flaws. Yet, we might agree that if we could repair the mechanisms in our economic systems that create cycles of poverty, the world would be a better place. This better world is envisioned in this Old Testament Mosaic Law book.

In a book titled *Deuteronomy*, published in 1995, author Thomas W. Mann states that “the laws of Deuteronomy 15 represent specific, concrete socioeconomic expressions of what it means to be the liberated covenant community.”⁶ Therefore, we ask the question what does a liberated covenant community look like? We can presume that Moses was referring to Israel as the covenant community. This is because the Bible repeatedly tells the story of Israel’s long-standing agreement with God, an arrangement that stipulates, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” However, just as with any contract, there are statutes. The Bible calls these statutes the *mitsvâh*. This Hebrew word *mitsvâh* translated into English means the Law. Therefore, let us take a deeper dive into the fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy to learn what laws would lead us to this kind of emancipated community.

⁶ Thomas Wingate Mann, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 117.

The laws found in the first eleven verses of chapter 15 are the laws concerning the sabbatical year. A sabbatical year is a period when all debts are forgiven. This period occurred every seven years. During this designated time, remission of debt was granted for all. I can only fathom what happens in a community that collectively experiences this forgiveness. With the burden of financial debt lifted from everyone, there must have been a sense of jubilation in the air, a feeling of freedom for all. The second verse of Deuteronomy 15 says, “and this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD’s remission has been proclaimed.”⁷

Obviously, within this community there were wide-ranging economic groups—those who had the resources to give, the lenders, and those who needed to borrow. The text also mentions that the borrowers were made up of two distinct groups: neighbors and foreigners. Let us take a moment to explore this idea of neighbors and foreigners. Moses was speaking to the children of Israel.⁸ These were the descendants of Abraham. They were preparing to enter a land that history taught them had been promised to them by God through his covenant relationship with their patriarch. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their family settled in Canaan years ago, but had to leave due to a famine. They fled to Egypt where they were prosperous for many years until they were forced into slavery. The Book of Exodus well documents that in the thirteenth century Moses led his people out of slavery toward Canaan, but they settled in the wilderness right outside of Canaan for forty years.

⁷ Deuteronomy 15:2, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the NRSV.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

It had been centuries since they called Canaan home. At this point, who were the neighbors, and who were the foreigners? This land had been home for years to the Canaanites, but to the Children of Israel, it was the home they never knew but to which they longed to return. This dichotomy still exists in the land formerly known as Canaan, situated on the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. This dichotomy is also prevalent in communities undergoing gentrification, which we will explore more in the subsequent chapters. Was the text instructing them to forgive the debts of one group and not the other, and if so, was this biased? We should also note that these instructions were given before they entered Canaan. These were the laws they were to follow once they arrived. This indicates that God intended for them to live amongst the residents who resided there before their return. In the wilderness, they lived isolated, but in Canaan, they would live integrated, to an extent. We can conclude that the neighbor was a fellow descendant of Abraham, and the foreigner was the Canaanite. The law, therefore, did not command them to treat the older residents as they would those from their group. Verse three clearly states, “of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.” Some theologians have resolved that Israel was to be an example to the nations around them. Keeping the laws, including the sabbatical year, would show other nations the benefits of serving Yahweh. If the other communities were as generous toward their people as Israel were toward their “neighbors,” perhaps they, too, could be prosperous.

Jesus, however, brings new light to the definition of neighbor in the Gospel of Luke 10. In the twenty-fifth verse, we are introduced to the parable of the Good

Samaritan.⁹ An expert asked Jesus what a person must do to inherit eternal life. Aware that this man was trying to test him, Jesus replied, “to do what is written in the law,” and asked how the expert interpreted it. He replied as an expert of the Mosaic Law would. The law says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus validates his answer and recommends that the teacher follow his advice. Wanting to push the issue, the expert follows with a second question “Who is my neighbor?” This is where Jesus enlightens him and us.

There was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho whom robbers attacked. This man was savagely beaten and left for dead. A Jewish priest and a Levite passed by the injured man and did not help. In fact, the scripture says they passed by him on the other side of the road, as if they did not even see him. Nevertheless, there was a Samaritan man who came to his rescue. Jesus uses the example of a Samaritan man for a specific reason. This illustration strengthens the lesson and drives home the point he was trying to make with the story. The Samaritans and Jews had no dealings with each other. There were tensions between the communities that were, to say the least, unneighborly. With this parable, Jesus was teaching the law expert that what he classified as a neighbor was incorrect. A neighbor was not a person who shared one’s cultural background. A neighbor was a person who showed compassion for their fellow man. This new concept

⁹ “The Good Samaritan at Work—Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself (Luke 10:25–37),” Theology of Work Project, accessed December 24, 2023, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/luke/gods-provision-luke/the-good-samaritan-at-work-loving-your-neighbor-as-yourself-luke-1025-37/>.

of neighbor meant that there should no longer be bias. The foreigner was now a part of the covenant community.

An Economically Diverse Community

Not only should this communal society comprise of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, but it should also be economically diverse. Verses 7 and 8 of Deuteronomy 15 say this:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be (Deu. 15:7–8).

The law acknowledges that there will be poor people within the community, and the command is not to kick them out, but to provide for them. Wealthy people will always have the financial muscle to push poor people out, but should they? The scripture says no. Pushing poor people out lacks compassion. The orders here are not to neglect the needy, but to help them.¹⁰

Additionally, there may be some benefits to preserving an economically diverse neighborhood. Let me be clear on what I mean by economically diverse. The idea of a community that is mixed in this way is scary for some people. Some immediately envision a homeless person living outside their high-priced condominium. Instead of fearing the neighbor without a home, imagine what could be learned from them if you lend a helping hand to that person and provide space for them within the city with affordable housing. Once that person is on their feet and feels safe and cared for, all

¹⁰ Blessing O Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11 and Its Socio-Economic Blueprints for Community Living," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5147>.

parties should be able to sit together at a table. The table is where the learning, growth, and reconstruction happen. A diversified community would benefit from the lived experiences of its residents who have different understandings and values. This is diversity at its best.

Unfortunately, we forego this kind of beautiful diversity in many communities, buying into the myth that the wealthy and working class cannot live side by side. They believe that the evicted and affluent have nothing in common. Therefore, some of us live in these silos called gated communities, suburbs, or housing developments, thinking no one outside our community understands us. Here in the Bible, the needy are acknowledged and not despised.

The passage also warns those with the resources not to meet the needs of those with resentment. Verse nine says, “Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.” I have seen people attend town hall meetings in droves to oppose low-income housing being built in “their” neighborhood. In most cases, those in opposition were newcomers challenging housing policies that would have kept their low-income “neighbors” in the community. Hostility towards programs that help the less fortunate is what this verse warns us against. Ironically, those who resist the idea of having low-income housing in their backyard give charitably to non-profit organizations. This is because giving to those in need can seem gratifying at a distance, but uncomfortable if the same folks want to live next door.

The Bible and history taught us that serving one's self-interest and giving begrudgingly has its consequences. The consequence is clearly stated in verse ten, where it says: "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake." Simply put, when we do not give generously to others, we block our blessings. The forfeits of a self-serving society may not be evident to some, but the proof is all around us.

Years ago, I listened to a Christian radio program in the early hours of the morning. The on-air personality read a letter that a young child mailed to the radio station. In the letter, the child asked an unpretentious and innocent question: If God is real, why does he allow people to be homeless and hungry? With a somber tone, the reader of the letter replied that people are not suffering from these things because God does not exist. Unfortunately, we, God's children, have not learned how to share. He explained that God has left enough food, clean water, and resources on Earth for all creation so that no one should be homeless or hungry. However, we have not learned how to share what God had left with us with everybody. The effects of our selfish behavior are so evident that even children can see it. Could it be possible that we are blind to the effects because of the illusion of being blessed?

The passage makes clear that giving ungrudgingly would result in God's blessings. Yet, if we believe that God's blessings are mainly monetary or materialistic, we have forfeited a much greater blessing—the Blessing of the liberated covenant community.

On a large scale, we can recognize that a small sector of society identified as the 1 percent has an excessive amount of money, and power is imbalanced in their favor. In

February 2020, Bloomberg.com published an article that stated, “the 1% is the symbol of wealth and power thanks to a protest movement. Since Occupy Wall Street popularized the term almost a decade ago, inequality has surged, and this exclusive group has only gotten richer and more influential.”¹¹ If such a small percentage of the world’s population possesses most of its prosperity, it is without question that God’s resources are not shared. This is not to say that there are no philanthropists amongst the 1 percent. Nor am I insinuating that rich people have not worked hard to achieve great wealth. I am suggesting that greed and the absence of liberal, ungrudged giving are visible globally and locally.

On a smaller scale, let us view this problem from a local level. When a community is gentrified, newer residents are often more affluent. Therefore, from the biblical perspective, they are in the lender’s position. They can give to the community, but it is not mandated. On the contrary, it is inverted. In gentrified communities, new residents and developers often receive tax abatements when purchasing real estate. These abatements are used as an incentive to encourage the well-off to take a chance to invest in a poor community. These same incentives are not presented to the poorer/initial residents. Do they lack the resources and knowledge to manage these kinds of opportunities, or could it be that their presence in the community is not expected to withstand the “redevelopment?” My question is, who do these incentives help and who do they hurt? The scripture in Deuteronomy 15 cautions that it hurts both the lender and the borrower.

¹¹ Ben Steverman and Reade Pickert, “This Is What It Takes to Be in the 1% Around the World,” *Bloomberg*, February 7, 2020, accessed November 18, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-02-07/how-to-be-in-the-richest-1-around-the-world#xj4y7vzkg>.

The study of theology identifies Deuteronomy 15 as a *shemittah* law. *Shemittah* law uses carefully reasoned arguments. It presents the law and the consequence if it is not followed. The *shemittah* law encourages its listeners to follow the law through careful argument. It states both the commandment and the results of obedience and disobedience. Therefore, what are the consequences of not taking care of the poor? One could conclude that the outcomes of not caring for the poor are prevalent worldwide. The results are high crime rates, low-performing schools, homelessness, starvation, and people dying from curable diseases.

Now, focusing on verses 4–6 in chapter 15, we find vital things that forewarn the outcomes. The advice in these verses stipulates that caring for the poor would make a nation a lender, not a borrower. Have you ever looked the world over in search of a nation that takes stellar care of the poor; a country that settles its debt with its indigenous people?¹² A republic that adequately cares for its seniors, veterans, and orphans? A nation where everyone has a home and adequate healthcare? There are 194 universally recognized countries in the world. Some countries are better than others at caring for the impoverished. For example, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland topped the list when “U.S. News & World Report” ranked The Best Countries for Development Policy in 2017, which recognized how well these countries care for their needier citizens. Moreover, they also ranked high on the list that rated the happiest nations and the best places to raise a family.

¹² Donald E. Gowan, “Book Review: Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15,” *Union Seminary Review* 48, no. 2 (1994): 192–194, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430004800216>.

Surprisingly, the nations considered the best at development policy were not amongst the richest. In fact, the wealthier countries are the ones in the most debt. We suppose these countries accumulated debt when trying to finance their growth, but the reason may be more theological than economical. Verses 4–6 of Deuteronomy 15 advise us that if a nation does not give ungrudgingly to the poor, it will persist in being a borrower. A rich nation borrows against a rich nation, serving as provisional financiers to each other instead of a consistent lender to the poor, as the scripture instructs. Greed has gotten us nowhere, and humanity at large is falling short when caring for the least of these.

The *shemittah* law promises that if a community can get together and practice this law, it can experience unprecedented self-sustaining financial stability. Globally achieving this economic goal may be unreasonable, but I do believe that it can be accomplished on a local level. Gentrified communities or communities primed to be gentrified are ideal locations and should apply these principles.

Deuteronomy 15:11

As Deuteronomy 15:11 states, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” This passage of scripture makes two thought-provoking, yet seemingly contradictory, assertions about the poor. Verse four says, “there need be no poor people among you.” Yet verse eleven says, “there will always be poor people in the land.” Which one will it be? Will practicing this law solve the problem of poverty, or will the problem persist? The statements are not a contradiction, but rather the revealing of two

truths.¹³ There will always be people in need; that goes without question. Verse four says, “there need be no poor.” God proclaimed that he would bless his people in the land they were about to inhabit. The blessings would be abundant, meaning there would be more than enough. There would be enough for the poor to be taken care of as well, but would they be cared for? The clause “there need be no” meant a decision needed to be made. How will you treat your brother, your sister, or your neighbor if you are the one in the position to give? The fact that the poor will be with us always does not degrade the destitute, but instead challenges the affluent. The problem may not be that we do not give; the problem may be that we are selective in our giving. If the Samaritan is now the neighbor as Jesus taught, we must eradicate the practice of being selective when giving. If not, we are practicing discrimination.

How do we stop discriminating against each other? First, we must seek ways to recognize each other as neighbors. If we do not treat each other as neighbors, we will perish as fools. Certainly, we will all be better for it when we can do this. The bottom line is that we will fail to treat someone as a neighbor if we do not first see them as a brother or sister. Now that we have determined that the Good Samaritan is our prototypical neighbor, we recognize that no one should be labeled a neighbor based on economic class, ethnicity, race, religion, or any other social construct. Moses’ audience in Deuteronomy saw a neighbor as one who shared their cultural and religious history. The neighbor was a descendant of Abraham, but we must broaden our perspective.

¹³ Norman K. Gottwald, “Abusing the Bible: The Case of Deuteronomy 15.” *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (2014): 196–198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637314527447>.

The word neighbor in this scripture is translated from the Hebrew word *אָח* (awkh). Strong's definition says, "awkh; a primitive word; a brother (used in the widest sense of literal relationship and metaphorical affinity or resemblance: another, brother(-ly); kindred like, other."¹⁴ The definition clarifies that the neighbor can be a brother, relative, or one with metaphorical affinity. What does it mean to have a metaphorical affinity? If someone has a metaphoric relationship with you, they have no literal connection to you per se. To have a metaphorical affinity means that although you have no literal blood relationship with a person, you still have a kinship affection toward them.

You do not have to be related to a person to have love, affection, empathy, and compassion toward them. They do not have to be a part of your group. This interpretation of neighbor is evident when you read the Good Samaritan parable Jesus presents in the Gospel of Luke, but possibly not as clear in Deuteronomy 15. When we limit Moses' audience to only the Israelites, the depiction of neighbor is distorted. We gain a fresh perspective when we consider that the Bible was and is a book for a broader audience. Christians believe that God, through the Holy Spirit, directed the formation of the Bible, foreknowing that it would make it into the hands of twenty-first-century disciples of Jesus. We would study both the Old and New Testaments and determine that we were a part of God's family, ingrafted with those that Moses referenced. The deciphering of the Hebrew word *awkh* (neighbor) proves that Jesus did not come to destroy the law but fulfill it by demonstrating that anyone could be a neighbor—even a person you have no biological or legal connection to or share commonalities with, like a Samaritan.

¹⁴ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, with Main Concordance, Appendix to the Main Concordance, Topical Index to the Bible, Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible, Dictionary of the Greek Testament* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 1995), 5.

This returns us to the question: can a community be economically diverse? If a Samaritan can be the neighbor of a Jewish person, surely a wealthy person can be the neighbor of a poor person. Verse eleven suggests it when it says, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” The words “in your land” implies that wealthy and needy residents would reside in the same place.¹⁵ Why is it hard to imagine this kind of community, and why is it that when a city is gentrified, the poor are constantly pushed out? I suppose low-income individuals do not fit into society’s concept of a model neighborhood. Instead of extending a hand to the needy, as the scripture suggests, an arm is extended to shove them out.

Gentrification creates a divide mainly along the lines of wealth. At the root, it is an issue of classism, but in many gentrified areas, poor people translate to Black and Brown people, which incorporates the issue of racism. African Americans, Latinx, Native Americans, and others commonly fall victim to gentrification because of their working-class or working-poor status in urban settings. Their working-class salary can no longer keep up with the changing community. While new high-rise condominiums are going up, the minimum wage remains the same. It is as if someone failed to notify the initial residents that the cost of living was about to change, nor did anyone offer them a job that could accommodate them. Government entities should put policies in place that help everyone; not just tax abatements for newcomers, but also rent regulation policies for longtime residents.

¹⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Deuteronomy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 134.

Who will advocate for such policies? If the Bible teaches us that communities should be economically diverse, Christian leaders should run to the front lines to advocate for poor people. This work occurs not only in the pulpit, but also in city halls and on the Senate floor. A large scope of the work can be found in discussions around tax reform.

The debate around tax reform is nothing new and can be traced back to biblical days. Tax reformation would deal with the argument of whether the government should redistribute income. We could stand on biblical principles if Christians chime in on the debate. Many Old Testament scriptures gave clear guidelines that instructed the wealthy to set aside a portion of their crops for the poor. Some biblical scholars question if the Bible offers straightforward answers on how to tax the rich, but the Bible is clear on helping the needy. The Bible says in the Book of Leviticus the poor have a right to the leftovers of the harvest (Lev. 23:22 [NIV]). Laws that governed the Israelites prohibited those with abundant crops from gleaning the corners of their fields, so that the poor would have something to eat. In addition to what we see in Deuteronomy 15, we also see this requirement in Deuteronomy 26:12: “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns.” We notice that the scripture denotes that the wealthy and poor live together within the same towns. There is no separation of the economic classes. The wealthy are to leave something for the poor—the leftovers of the harvest. If our society operates from principles of greed, however, there will be no leftovers to share.

The sabbatical year was every seven years, and the year of the tithe was every three years. Caring for the poor was a cultural norm and obviously in place to assist those that needed it. Hamilton states, “the intent of the law is at this point made explicit: that the release of the loans is for the benefit of the poor.”¹⁶ However, in a society motivated by greed, the benefits go to the wrong people.¹⁷

A prime example of this greed was when the Paycheck Protection Program was rolled out in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The Paycheck Protection Program was a 953-billion-dollar program established by the federal government to help businesses and organizations in need during the pandemic. The intent was to help employers pay their staff at a time when the country and the world were shut down. Soon we were reading headlines that big corporations with questionable hardship had applied for the forgivable loans, leaving small businesses to fend for themselves. The next round of loans was infiltrated by frauds, who made up bogus businesses just to put money in their pockets, and all the while small businesses were shutting down across the country. The newspaper articles were deplorable, and it was obvious that the country needed a moral awakening. Tackling the economic and moral issues of a nation is almost impossible, but we must believe that change can come on a local level. One community at a time and the faith-based communities in gentrified cities can lead this charge because caring for the poor and sustaining an economically diverse community go hand in hand.

¹⁶ Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 11.

¹⁷ Simon Barry, “The Year of Jubilee: A Hermeneutic for Social and Moral Transformation in South Africa,” *In Die Skriflig/in Luce Verbi* 45, no. 4 (2011): 867–897, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v45i4.206>.

Conclusion

We must simultaneously teach the principles of Deuteronomy 15 and advocate for policies that enact them.¹⁸ Preaching and teaching the liberated covenant community's message is essential, but not enough. The message should be combined with advocacy work to create this model neighborhood; a city that can demonstrate to other communities that united, economically diverse communities can exist. I would also suggest that the message be taught from the pulpit and public square. It is unlikely that all the residents in a community are Christians or practice any faith-based tradition. This message must reach atheists, agnostics, and everyone else. Those who are not members of an Abrahamic faith community must be included in our efforts. This work is not exclusively ecumenical; it is interfaith and beyond. Non-Christian brothers and sisters should be viewed as beloved because if God created all people, they too, are sacred. Caring for the poor is not just a Christian thing, but a human thing.

It is evident that the poor are not going anywhere in Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus reiterates that "the poor will be with us always." However, the quandary remains, how will we treat them?¹⁹ How we treat them is a direct reflection of how we view them. If we view the poor as a burden on society, that is how we will treat them. We will treat them as if they have no value. They may get a dollar from us every now and again. Our preferred charity may receive a donation at Christmas, but that is the extent of our giving. This is a far cry from the unbegrudged giving we intend to study in

¹⁸ David Brat, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 65, no. 2 (2011): 180–182, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096431106500208>.

¹⁹ James Harris, *Year of Jubilee: Biblical Principles for Systemic Freedom* (n.p.: Guru Jimmy, 2020), 12.

this book. Viewing the poor as neighbors requires a commitment to help them consistently. It dares us to see the stranger as a brother, sister, and friend.

Each community that accepts the assignment in this book must commit to the work of creating a liberated covenant community. This work will not be easy, but I believe it will be worth it. Aside from shifting gentrified communities into united communities, other outcomes may be better schools and less crime. Each community must determine what this work looks like for them. What would a unification, not gentrification, movement look like in Schenectady, New York, or Asbury Park, New Jersey? Certainly, it would not look identical. The only thing that will remain at the root of each movement is the imparted lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy. We will study the sabbatical year extensively but not exclusively., The sabbatical year lesson can be considered a great community-building tool.

The similarities between the stories of Canaan in the Old Testament and the impoverished urban cities of today are fascinating. The Israelites lived in Canaan for years, but were forced to leave because of famine. They lived comfortably in Egypt for generations until they were enslaved. Eventually, they made their exodus from Egypt and fled oppression under the leadership of Moses. While wandering in the wilderness they made plans to return to Canaan, the place they once called home. However, they were fearful of the people that now resided there. They stayed in the wilderness for forty years, but had their eyes on Canaan the entire time.

According to some practical theologians, “migration is a journey undertaken in search of a new home.”²⁰ Many urban cities in America experienced an influx of new residents from the 1940s through the 1970s. This migration event changed the landscape of the United States. During the industrial age of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the trajectory of urban cities drastically changed. These cities offered work opportunities at factories, which lured many white Americans from rural areas, and white immigrants new to the country to places like Detroit, Michigan, Schenectady, New York, and Asbury Park, New Jersey. These cities became ideal locations for working-class families. Many factory jobs did not require a college education or even a high school diploma, but workers could make a living wage. There was an overlaying migration taking place among African Americans. The Great Migration, as it was coined, happened between 1916 and 1970. African Americans were moving from the south to the same urban cities, looking for work in factories. In 1945, shortly after World War II, a mass exodus took place. White families left these factory cities in droves. This phenomenon was called White Flight.

White folks left urban cities for the suburbs, and the Israelites left Canaan for Egypt. We determined that the Israelites left Canaan for survival. The Bible well documents this, but why did white families leave urban cities? Writer Stefanie Waldek says, “the most common answer is racism, plain and simple—White folks just didn’t want to live next to Black people who had moved to northern cities as part of the Great

²⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Mary Elizabeth Moore, and Musa W. Dube, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 108.

Migration.”²¹ They took advantage of the discriminatory practice of redlining. They saw an opportunity for what they considered a better life for their families. It could be that the race riots of the 1960s and 1970s scared them to the suburbs. Whatever the reasons were, it is without question that White Flight occurred, and soon urban cities were mostly comprised of Black and Brown families.

Gentrified cities are experiencing Reverse White Flight today, just as Canaan experienced the return of the Israelites around 1250 BCE. Why did it take so long for white Americans to return to these urban cities? Why is it that poor people are pushed out of these cities? It is for the same reason that Israelites stayed in the wilderness for forty years. They feared the residents that lived in Canaan, just as suburban white families feared inner cities. As the authors of *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* note, “Kwok Pui-Ian, a Chinese migrant living in the USA, sums it up well. A contact zone is the space of colonial encounters where people of different geographical and historical backgrounds are brought into contact with each other, usually shaped by inequality and conflictual relations. The interaction between two cultures with asymmetry of power is often not voluntary and one-dimensional, but is full of tension, fractures, and resistance.”²²

²¹ Stefanie Waldek, “What is White Flight?” House Beautiful, October 9, 2020, <https://www.housebeautiful.com/lifestyle/a34319800/what-is-white-flight/>.

²² Kim-Cragg, Moore, and Dube. *Interdependence*, 118.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

When archaeologists discover a lost city, it is monumental. The world is introduced to a forgotten civilization. Unearthed civilizations provoke questions that are not easily answered, mainly because those with the real answers are no longer with us, and their voices were silenced long ago. Those voices belonged to people who occupied spaces others wanted, and those undoubtedly had the power to take them. Not only did they take the land, but they also dominated the narrative and erased critical parts of history. Controlling the narrative would justify their atrocities and give the foundation for systems of oppression for centuries to come. However, this system only continues to thrive if the voices of Seneca Village and countless other communities remain buried and ignored.

American history has been fragmented for generations, and only chosen segments have been taught. I vividly remember sitting in history class my freshman year at Delaware State University when I first heard about Black Wall Street. Black Wall Street was situated in the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma. This community of African Americans created a self-sufficient business district in the early 1900s.¹ By 1905,

¹ LaQuitta Barnes, *Black Wall Street: The Spirit of Community* (New York, NY: Our History Told, 2021) 5.

Black businesses dominated the strip in the Greenwood section of town. Businesses included doctors' offices and barbershops. The community also had its own newspaper, schools, and a grocery store. Black Wall Street was prosperous in many ways, but in 1921, it experienced the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Tulsa Race Massacre occurred between May 31st and June 1st of 1921. Over a period of approximately eighteen hours, this successful, predominantly Black neighborhood was burned to the ground. An angry mob of white locals attacked Black residents and destroyed their homes and businesses, even bombing the neighborhood from the air. Countless lives were lost, and many were left homeless.

As my professor spoke, I leaned in, becoming increasingly intrigued, but after the initial enthrallment wore off, I became upset. I asked myself, "Why am I just learning about this? Why had no one told me about Black Wall Street before now?" I felt like it was hidden from me, and I was right. It was not hidden from just me, but was withheld from all of us. This account in Greenwood is unnervingly comparable to the 2016 movie *Hidden Figures*. *Hidden Figures* is a movie that tells the story of three brilliant African American women: Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. These women worked for NASA and were the masterminds behind one of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's greatest achievements. They made history when they launched astronaut John Glenn into orbit. They cracked a glass ceiling and changed the trajectory of space aviation in the United States of America. There are more than hidden figures buried beneath America's fragmented history; there are also hidden communities. Black Wall Street and Seneca Village are just two of the hidden

communities excluded from United States history curriculums.² As author Scott

Ellsworth explains,

It is part of our nature as human beings whether as individuals, groups, or societies that we create “pasts” with which we can live. If the reality of our history poses questions about our lives of today which are too painful or ominous to ponder then we will mold our past into a less threatening chronicle or repress it entirely. If anything, our “historic memory” is as malleable as our personal one. Thus, the way in which the Tulsa race riot is remembered speaks to us as much about the Tulsa and America of today as it does about the events of 1921.³

This chapter will focus on Seneca Village more than Black Wall Street. While both communities deserve equal attention, Seneca Village is closer in proximity historically and geographically to the focus of this doctoral project. Seneca Village will serve as the historical foundation and muse. Let us first take a journey to the famous Central Park in New York City. Central Park attracts more than fifteen million visitors a year. It is considered one of the city’s premier attractions. One can attend a concert there in the summer or visit the zoo in the fall. The Park is two and a half miles long and a half-mile wide. Taking up most of Manhattan’s land area, it comprises 843 acres. However, a good portion of that land once belonged to African Americans in the early to mid-1800’s. Seneca Village was taken away from its residents and largely erased from history books until recent years. Why was this story left out of our history books for so long? Perhaps for the same reasons that Black Wall Street, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, or

² Arpita Aneja, and Olivia B. Waxman, “The Overlooked Stories of America’s Black Wall Streets,” May 28, 2021, YouTube video, 10:26, <https://youtu.be/SUCv8NVgnfc>.

³ Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 98.

Mary Jackson were not initially well known—because hidden history justifies the means for systemic racism, classism, sexism, gentrification, and more.

Welcome to Seneca Village

Seneca Village is recorded as “the site of the first sizable community of African American property owners in New York City.”⁴ Free Black Americans owned land at a time when slavery of Africans was still prevalent. President Lincoln would not sign the Emancipation Proclamation until January 1, 1862. Yet, thirty-seven years prior, a Black man named Andrew Williams purchased three lots of farmland located near what is now 85th Street in Manhattan. Andrew was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where he served as a trustee. The job of a trustee has remained the same over the years. Trustees are responsible for buying and maintaining church property. Perhaps Andrew’s role as a trustee convinced him that if he could manage property on behalf of the church, certainly he could do it for himself. He would be able to provide adequate housing for his family. Census records show that Andrew lived with his wife, in-laws, children, and grandchildren. At the time of purchase, he worked shining shoes. Many Black Americans worked as laborers at that time. The jobs were not lucrative, but free African Americans in the Northern States, such as New York, managed. New York had some form of an Emancipation Act since 1799. This act did not alleviate Black people from experiencing discrimination or forced indentured servitude; however, it made the conditions in New York seem more appealing than those in Mississippi:

⁴ Gerald David Jaynes, *Encyclopedia of African American Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 739.

In 1799, New York passed a Gradual Emancipation act that freed slave children born after July 4, 1799, but indentured them until they were young adults. In 1817 a new law passed that would free slaves born before 1799 but not until 1827. By the 1830 census there were only seventy-five slaves in New York and the 1840 census listed no slaves in New York City.⁵

New York offered a sense of liberty that gave Williams the confidence to take such a bold step. He purchased the land from John and Elizabeth Whitehead for \$125.00. The church that he was a member of purchased six lots of land on the same day that would be used as a cemetery for Black people, because during these days, Black people were rarely permitted to be buried alongside whites. One can presuppose that either the church influenced Williams or Williams persuaded his church to acquire the land that day. Whatever the case may have been, it caused a trickle-down effect. Another trustee from the church, Epiphany Davis, soon purchased twelve lots of land, and before long, Seneca Village was born. Within seven years, fifty lots had been sold in the area, with half purchased by African Americans. That meant that at least four more lots were purchased immediately following Williams, Davis, and the church. History records that by the end of 1839, more than one hundred African Americans were living in Seneca Village.

Seneca Village was a working-class community. As mentioned before, Andrew Williams, the first African American man to purchase land in Seneca Village, was a shoe shiner. That may not seem like a professional career by today's standards, but it kept his family fed. Williams, however, aspired for more. By 1855, he was a licensed cartman. Cartmen were licensed by the mayor's office to haul goods around New York City. This

⁵ "When Did Slavery End in New York?" New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.nyhistory.org/community/slavery-end-new-york-state>.

was a profession that was previously only given to white men, but under Mayor Fernando Wood's administration, this position became available to African Americans. This change could be due to the increase in trade during the 1850s, as New York City ports exported and imported more goods than all the country's other ports combined. When the occasion presented itself for Williams to make a leap up the corporate ladder, he jumped at the opportunity. Andrew Williams was not a man who was afraid to take chances.

Another incentive for purchasing land was voting. Landownership was so important to Black Americans because it allowed them the opportunity to vote. The fight for voting rights in the United States is well documented. The history of voting is disjointed; if African American men were allowed to vote in New York City in the early 1800s, why were so many voting rights acts needed decades later? Williams, Davis, and other Black men purchased land for several reasons. The privilege to vote was just one of many, but voting was key. In New York, at that time, Black men "were required to own \$250 worth of property to be eligible to vote. They also had to prove that they had lived in the state and paid taxes for at least three years. By contrast, the state gradually dropped all property requirements for White voters."⁶ The fight to participate in the democratic process has always been an uphill battle for Black Americans. Still, landownership gave Black New Yorkers a fighting chance in the nineteenth century.

The living conditions in Seneca Village were another amenity that drew people. Before the Great Migration began in 1916, African Americans were fleeing to the North. Cities like New York, Detroit, Schenectady, and Chicago were slightly equivalent to today's sanctuary cities. However, these cities were safer for free and Black fugitive

⁶ Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

slaves than those below the Mason-Dixon line. Many of these cities became crowded, and the housing situation was poor. “Blacks were the worst-housed segment of the New York population, and most Blacks lived in appalling conditions and were eager for a chance to move to a more open and healthy environment.”⁷ Seneca Village offered more space and fresh air. In Seneca Village, Andrew Williams had space for his grandchildren to play. Living as an enslaved person down south meant working from sunup to sundown. You were not seen as a human being. You were treated as property because, to your owners, that is what you were. The living conditions in New York City may have been less than desirable, but at least you had scheduled work hours. In Manhattan, you could go to the store and buy groceries and choose what you wanted to eat for dinner, as opposed to eating food unsuitable for farm animals grazing on the same plantation where you labored. The square footage of a cramped apartment in the city may not have been much larger than a small shack with a dirt floor in Alabama. However, the taste of freedom off the plantation made the space feel enormous by comparison. In the 1800s, northern states offered more to African Americans than the confederate south. Seneca Village offered more than the deplorable conditions of the other segregated living quarters in the city.

In fact, Seneca Village was one of the city’s least segregated communities. New York City was a hotbed for European immigrants.⁸ Preceding the opening of Ellis Island in 1890, individual states regulated the immigration process in the United States. From 1855 to 1890, a station in the Battery of Manhattan served as the country’s main

⁷ Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

⁸ Diana Wall DiZerega, and Steven Zucker, “Seneca Village: African Americans in Early New York,” Smart History, September 24, 2018, YouTube video, 6:26. <https://youtu.be/Ct9iepqScxk>.

immigration port. Nearly eight million immigrants passed through New York City during those years. Many of them stayed and made New York their home. Most were from Northern European countries, and some found their way to Seneca Village. “By 1855, some thirty percent of the 264 residents of the Seneca Village neighborhood were White, mostly Irish. In a city noted for ethnic tensions and violence, Seneca Village stood out for its generally good race relations.”⁹ Irish immigrants found solace in Seneca Village. They had something in common with African Americans. During the 1840s and 1850s, Irish people were new to the country and experiencing America’s intense fear, hatred, and discrimination.

Many early Irish immigrants came to America forcibly because of a famine they were experiencing in their homeland. The Great Famine of Ireland occurred between 1845 and 1851. It caused the deaths of nearly one million people. It resulted in the emigration of more than 2.5 million. The famine started when a fungus called *Phytophthora* attacked the potato crops. Half of the potato crops were ruined in the first year, and around 75% were ruined over the next five years. The potato was the main produce for Ireland’s rural agricultural community. The potato famine led to starvation, death, and a mass exodus from Hibernia. The British government failed to provide adequate famine relief when they decided to cut assistance measures in 1847. When the Irish reached the shores of northeast America, they were destitute. They sought refuge in America but were met with hostility from white Americans, who regarded them as poor and disease-ridden. The age-old rhetoric began. The Irish will take jobs from Americans and put a strain the economy. It was said that the Irish were criminals, rapists, and

⁹ Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

delinquents. Alongside the Negro, the Irish immigrant was America's newest target for hate. So, immigrants found their way to Black neighborhoods. At the time, these areas were safe havens. It was understood that all those who resided in these communities faced the same struggles. There was built-in solidarity that fostered a harmonious community.

These neighborhoods were also appealing because they were financially feasible. Seneca Village residents worked downtown but could not afford to live there. "Many of the residents of Seneca Village were working-class Blacks who traveled daily from their homes to jobs in lower Manhattan."¹⁰ Residents of the village proved to be productive citizens. They worked hard, worshiped together, saved their money, and strived to educate the next generation. The jobs in New York City at that time ranged from farmer, stagecoach driver, teacher, blacksmith, to physician. African Americans and immigrants were not qualified for certain jobs due to no fault of their own. It was illegal for African enslaved to read and even free Black people had limited opportunities for education.

No professors or physicians were living in Seneca Village. Those positions required educational degrees, and Alexander Twilight had graduated only two years before the founding of Seneca Village. Twilight was the first known African American to earn a bachelor's degree from an American college. Andrew Williams, the village's first resident, was a cartman, and Epiphany Davis, the second known resident, was a store clerk.¹¹ The other residents had to have similar jobs, in occupations that did not require much education. It was a legal and widespread practice for Negroes and immigrants to be

¹⁰ Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

¹¹ "Seneca Village: The Williams Family Legacy," Central Park Conservancy, October 21, 2020, YouTube video, 6:38. <https://youtu.be/MOIfEoGBqZ0>.

excluded from several professional fields, and they were only considered for unskilled labor positions. Despite the intentions to set them back, they still thrived. Purchasing property for \$125 was no easy feat for a Black man in 1825. Records show that Epiphany Davis brought his twelve lots of land for \$578. Although these men were not educated, they made smart moves, and buying uptown property was an intelligent decision. “Uptown property in places such as Seneca Village was much less expensive than land downtown.”¹² Williams proved to be wise and frugal. When the village was taken through eminent domain, he was able to immediately purchase property in Newtown, in the Borough of Queens. Newtown was another successful predominantly Black neighborhood.

In the summer of 1856, Seneca Village was booming. The village housed three churches, a grocery store, and a school for Black students. There were plans to start a second school, but it was at this time that city leaders decided that they were going to establish Central Park.¹³ It was determined that the rapidly growing metropolis needed an urban park. As the city grew, open, green spaces became scarce, and a park would give people a way to escape the madness of Manhattan. However, for the residents of Seneca Village, the madness was just about to ensue.

Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux developed plans for Central Park. Olmstead is referred to as the father of American landscape architecture. In their plans,

¹² Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

¹³ Herbert Seignoret, “Unearthing New York City’s Forgotten Past: Seneca Village,” Dyckman Farmhouse Museum, streamed live on February 3, 2021, YouTube video, 1:10:38, <https://youtu.be/whxbqvNJvKk>.

they had no regard for the homes they were about to destroy and the lives they were about to disrupt. In 1853, the New York State legislature selected seven hundred and fifty acres of land that would serve as the site of the new park. This gave Olmstead and Vaux the license to move forward and roll right over Seneca Village. This decision was met with resistance from the residents. Andrew Williams was one of the first members of the community to fight back. He was offered a little more than two thousand dollars for his land. After living there for more than thirty years, he knew his property was worth more than that. He demanded at least four thousand dollars. His request was not honored. Williams and all the residents were forcibly removed.

Before they were removed, they were defamed. Legislators and landscape designers could not justify demolishing this flourishing community without the help of the press. Politicians and newspapers began to label Seneca Village as a shantytown. “Most observers described the humble dwellings of Seneca Village residents as ‘shanties.’ In part, the word accurately describes small, one-story, six-to-ten-foot-high dwellings usually built out of unpainted rough board and not professionally constructed.”¹⁴ The residents built their homes themselves. Their homes were not fancy, but they were not shanties either. The papers described these hardworking middle-class residents as squatters and vagabonds. This was and remained a viable strategy for destroying Black and Brown communities. Paint a picture of worthless people, and no one will see their value. The residents made a valiant effort to fight for their homes and community. But alas, in 1857, they lost that fight. The city used eminent domain to take

¹⁴ Roy Rosenzweig, and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 68.

Seneca Village by force. Force was used not only legally but also physically when police officers were called in. After the police successfully vacated the village, it was demolished.

Three Churches, One Village, All People, One God

What was lost with the destruction of Seneca village was far more than a self-sufficient community of free Black Americans. We lost a living example of a liberated covenant community. The residents of the village lived together and worshiped together. There were three churches in total. There was the African Union Methodist Church, the All Angels' Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion).

The A.M.E. Zion Church is an international denomination that had its humble beginnings in New York City, not to be confused with the A.M.E Church which was founded in Philadelphia. The A.M.E. Zion Church was at the center of the founding of Seneca Village. It should come as no surprise that the community became a racially diverse and harmonious environment. The early members of the church were accustomed to worshipping with white parishioners, although at first it was not altogether a pleasant experience. It all started at John Street Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest Methodist congregation in North America. The congregation formed in 1766 as the Wesleyan Society in America. Soon after its conception Black members joined. Methodism was initially introduced to America by Irish immigrants. They began to convert to Methodism while in Europe under the leadership of its founder John Wesley. They brought their faith with them to the Americas. In 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church was officially established and free Blacks and fugitive African enslaved gravitated to these new

Christian communities in hopes of finding true brothers and sisters in Christ.

Unfortunately,

The church faced schism over issues of race and slavery. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church were formed because of the racial prejudice experienced by African Americans in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The slavery issue split the Methodist Church into two bodies: the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (organized in 1845).¹⁵

In 1796, some of the Black members of John Street Methodist Episcopal Church decided to leave after experiencing this discrimination, and the A.M.E. Zion Church was born. The Mother Zion Church, as it is affectionally called, was in Harlem on West 137th Street. Since 1923, but as early as the 1820s, many of the church members made their home in Seneca Village. Soon the church would follow its members. Mother Zion was the first Black Church in the city yet, in a country and a state that still sanctioned slavery, and they continued to search for an area that offered a more secure setting.

Research shows that members of Mother Zion were the first to purchase land in the village, but the A.M.E. Zion Church was not the first to erect an ecclesiastical building there. That distinction belongs to the African Union Methodist Church. In 1825, Mother Zion purchased land in Seneca Village only to form a cemetery, not to build a church edifice. The Common Council, which was the title given to the city government at the time, feared that burial sites contributed to the yellow fever epidemic. Most of the burial grounds in New York were in the congested downtown area of the city. Mother Zion's cemetery was also located downtown. Hence, they were ordered to stop burying

¹⁵ Robert E. Davies, "Methodism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism/America>.

their members in their graveyards. Upon request, the council granted temporary space to the A.M.E. Zion Church at the Potter's Field in Washington Square.

The church quickly consumed all the burial space allotted, and the trustees were forced to look for land elsewhere. As fate would have it, John and Elizabeth Whitehead were looking to get rid of the large plots of land they owned. Mother Zion buried their dead there but would not actually put a church building there until 1853. However, the African Union Methodist Church erected a building in 1837, when Deacon William Matthews purchased land on 85th Street for himself and for the church. They also had the local school for Black students located in the basement. The council allowed burials in the village until 1852. Then, a law was put into place that prohibited burials south of 86th Street. After that, the Mother Zion Church was forced to bury their dead in the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn.

The All Angels' Church was the second church to construct a building on the grounds. This church started as an Episcopalian Church mission. The mission began in the 1830s, and by 1849, a physical building was on site in the village. The missionary effort started off slow in the 1830s and began to pick up steam in 1846 when clergymen at St. Michael's Episcopalian Church devised a plan to reach the lost in Seneca Village. In 1849, a wooden church building that four women funded was opened by Reverend Thomas McClure Peters. Seventy-five percent of the congregation was white, mostly of German descent and the other 25% were African Americans. When the village was demolished in 1857, members continued to gather in a nearby home. They were able to secure their own property on West 81st Street in 1859. The church is still housed there today in 2022.

The story of Seneca Village reminds us that when a community is destroyed, its houses of worship are devastated. Mother A.M.E. Zion Church still exists in New York City¹⁶; however, it relocated to Harlem. Ironically, this pattern was also prevalent among Black New Yorkers of the day. Black city residents were forced out of the downtown and midtown sections of the city and pushed uptown. All Angels' Church also had to relocate, but not as far. Could this be because the congregation was made up of mostly white parishioners? I found little information on ~~the~~ ~~topic~~. It is presumed that much of the history of the African Union Methodist Church of Seneca Village was buried. This just goes to show that the people and churches of Seneca Village were seen as disposable.

Hopefully, we know better now. The people of Seneca Village were not dispensable, and the true ingenuous history of America is vital. America is searching for its true story, a more honest narrative. Beneath the beauty and splendor of Central Park lies a story that is not yet widely known, but it should be. I believe if we continue to dig for the truth, we will better understand how we got here. We will understand why Black and Brown communities continue to be railroaded in the name of progress and development. We should ask ourselves the question, is gentrification simply a continuation of what happened between West 82nd Street and West 89th Street in 1857?

One of the objectives of this chapter is to connect American History and Biblical History to address the current issues of gentrification. Gentrification is occurring in cities all over the country, in mostly Black and Brown communities. They are the Seneca Villages of our day. They are residents being offered below property value prices; the

¹⁶ Derry Presbyterian Church, "History of the AME Zion Church," streamed live on November 15, 2020, YouTube video, 50:50, <https://www.youtube.com/live/6Ee0ZvfPecg?feature=share>.

ones being pushed out in the name of progress. We will study the story of Seneca Village alongside the story of Canaan in the Old Testament. We may discover that we are repeating the nation's worst atrocities. These atrocities continue to be committed against vulnerable residents in small communities everywhere. It is my hope that we can learn from this research study so that we can solve this problem together. However, two things are required to do that. First, we must not be afraid to explore biblical principles, even if one is not a Christian. Secondly, we must study American History with new clean lenses that no longer hide the truth. We can thrive only if we tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us, God.

Hidden Communities

Someone tried to bury these Black and Brown communities, but still, they rise. The number of Black communities disclosed under our broken American history is too numerous to study extensively. However, this chapter will mention a few of them, and additional study is recommended to learn and share their stories. Give them their voice back and grant future generations the privilege of their presence.

Bronzeville, Chicago, Illinois

During the 1920s through the 1950s, Bronzeville, Chicago, was the center of African American culture and was considered Chicago's first African American business district. Their businesses included a Black-owned bank and insurance company. Like Seneca Village, Bronzeville was a culturally diverse community and, at its height, housed more the 300,000 residents. These residents lived in tight quarters, and this fostered a

racially diverse, closely knit neighborhood. Many residents were forced to live in the community due to unfair housing practices. This district produced some of the great music and art that the South Side of Chicago is still famous for today.

Hayti, Durham, North Carolina

Hayti was once the African American community's commercial district and social center in Durham, North Carolina. Hayti was initially established following the Civil War, and the neighborhood was built around St. Joseph's African Methodist Episcopal Church. The district was nicknamed "Black Wall Street" by Booker T. Washington, a prominent Black leader during that time. He served as an advisor for several United States Presidents. In 1868, Reverend Edian Markham, an A.M.E. Missionary, and formerly enslaved man, traveled to Durham to start a church. "He brought property from Minerva Fowler and built his first place for worship, a 'Brush Arbor.' Four posts were anchored in the ground surrounded at the top with four boards covered with branches forming the roof; the ground was the floor."¹⁷ Eventually, the building became a wooden structure, and the community of Hayti began to grow around it. Hayti existed for many years until it was devastated by Urban Renewal.

Farish Street, Jackson, Mississippi

Even in the deep south, there were flourishing Black communities. The Farish Street Neighborhood was in Jackson, Mississippi. By 1908, more than 30% of this area in

¹⁷ "The History of St. Joseph's AME Church and the St. Joseph's Historic Foundation," Our History, Hayti Heritage Center, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://hayti.org/about-us/our-history/>.

Jackson was Black owned. It comprised businesses and homes that Black families owned. It was the premier Black business district in the area until the 1970s. Jackson State University, a historically Black college founded in 1877, was once located on Farish Street.

Jackson Ward, Richmond, Virginia

For years the leading Black community in Richmond, Virginia was called the Jackson Ward. According to Michael Harriot, “Soon, so many businesses emerged in the predominantly Black community that it was called the birthplace of black capitalism. Because the area was home to so many Black-owned banks, insurance companies and other investment groups.”¹⁸

Maggie L. Walker, the first Black woman to own a bank in the United States opened St. Luke Penny Savings Bank in Jackson Ward in 1910. Jackson Ward was coined the Harlem of the South. Some of the biggest artists of the day performed there, including Duke Ellington & Ella Fitzgerald. Like Hayti in North Carolina and Seneca Village in New York City, Jackson Ward came to its demise at the hands of the local government. When,

An all-white City Council’s plan for building and revitalizing the city targeted Jackson Ward. A plan to build federal housing further decimated the area after only 25 of the neighborhood’s displaced families were allowed to live in the 297 units that replaced the 200 homes that were torn down. The all-white Virginia State Assembly completed the dismantling of the historic area when it voted to run a section of Interstate 95 through the neighborhood in the 1950s.¹⁹

¹⁸ Michael Harriot, “The Other Black Wall Streets,” *The Root*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.theroot.com/the-other-black-wall-streets-1823010812>.

¹⁹ Harriot, “Black Wall Streets.”

Many communities could be listed. The stories are eerily similar. Although some may want to believe that tragic stories like this are a thing of the past, they are not. There is a Black community being erased right now. At this very moment, city council members are reviewing plans submitted by developers who have big plans for a small city, and these big plans do not include the little people.

Conclusion

“The loss of Seneca Village went largely unnoticed by the outside world until the late twentieth century. In 2001, the Central Park Conservancy, the organization responsible for maintaining Central Park, erected a plaque to commemorate Seneca Village.”²⁰ While the work of the Central Park Conservancy is appreciated, it is more than plaques.²¹ There must be change. There must be a change in America of its dreadful habit of pushing the marginalized further to the margins. We are watching the same patterns repeatedly happen, which is called gentrification in this season. It is no coincidence that most of the communities that are being gentrified surround historical Black churches. There is a connection here between the history of our faith and the history of our country that cannot be overlooked.

The settlers who came to the Americas long ago were taught they were God’s chosen people. They were the Israelites, and the indigenous Native Americans were the Canaanites. Therefore, it was of no consequence if they destroyed them in the name of

²⁰ Jaynes, *African American Society*, 740.

²¹ Sara Cedar Miller, *Seeing Central Park* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2020), 159.

Jesus. From there, the pattern continued. For this reason, my approach to fixing the problem is grounded in the Bible. Let us fix the problem from where it started.

I want to share that I am an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. As a Christian and disciple of Jesus, I study the Bible and I strive to live it. Therefore, I do not believe the Bible in and of itself is problematic. The problem as I see it is that it is not always properly read and taught. The Bible is used for evil far too often. The Bible has been used to justify oppression, genocide, and other acts of discrimination. I yearn for the day that Christian politicians, pastors, and others can fully embrace the law taught in Deuteronomy 15 that instructs us to care for the poor and not to push them around.

As an itinerant pastor in the A.M.E. Zion Church, a bishop appoints me to serve a church and community in any given city where one of our churches is located. One of our leading churches is centrally located in my hometown of Asbury Park, New Jersey. When I was growing up the city was about 80% Black. It was a working-class community. However, it was also touched by the race riots/ uprisings of the 1970s. While I was away at college in the late 1990s, it started to undergo gentrification. I had no real issue with the redevelopment. Asbury Park is located on the New Jersey Shore, so it was likely to reemerge as a resort area at some point. I did hold issue with how rents and the cost of living were skyrocketing. I knew that the community was changing and that many of the working-class Black families would not be able to withstand the transformation.

In 2019 I was sent to pastor a church in Schenectady, New York. The church building sits in the center of the Hamilton Hill section of town. It was obvious that I was pastoring in what was once a thriving diverse community that housed the Black residents.

As soon as I arrived, I began to see the signs I was too naïve to notice in Asbury Park. Before the end of my first year at the church I had three members that had to relocate because their landlords wanted to raise the rent. Like Asbury Park, Schenectady has a lot of churches. When I witnessed the gentrification in New Jersey I often wondered why none of the pastors were speaking up. Poor people were being pushed out and I thought that advocating for them should have been high on the local clergy's agenda. Now that I was the pastor in a community that was in its infancy stages of gentrification, what could I do? Should I equip the members for the inevitable? Do I attend city council meetings and try to advocate for the more vulnerable residents? Should I try to gain access to meetings with developers to see what their plans are? I was not sure what to do but I did know that something needed to be done and it needed to be done now.

The biblical foundation of this final project, Deuteronomy 15, will help us identify the crimes that were committed against Seneca Village. They were the same crimes committed in the Bible. This chapter teaches about justice and inclusivity in a radical way that can help us with the issues presented in this study. Let us get things right where our ancestors got them wrong. If we fail to tackle gentrification now it will only show up again in the next generation—just as Seneca Village showed up as Asbury Park, Baltimore, and Brooklyn.

An uncompromised teaching of this biblical lesson can help us repair the mechanisms in our economic systems that originally created gentrification.. Our biblical foundation partnered with our historical focus will paint the picture we need to create our blueprint for change. Historians, theologians, and archaeologists have provided the resources, but we will have to do the work.

The history around Seneca Village is a source of inspiration. Imagine what Seneca Village could have developed into if Central Park had not mowed over it. What can the Village teach us now to help us unify rather than gentrify? A plaque should not one day be erected that says Black businesses used to thrive in Asbury Park. I hope they never have to place a memorial indicating Black families used to live on Hamilton Hill. There must be change and unity, and it must be now!

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Replacing gentrification with unification is a change that can only happen if we take an honest look at the conditions of our neighborhoods and the treatment of the most marginalized in each community. Far too often, we have attempted to unify communities without taking the initial steps of rectifying systems of subjugation. Unification between any group of people is virtually impossible when one group is free and the other oppressed. If one group has privilege and another is held back, there will never be unanimity. When I witnessed gentrification happen in my hometown, I asked myself the question, “how is this city becoming more diverse and more segregated all at the same time?” I kept watching as well-meaning folks, me included, tried to bring longtime residents together with new residents. These meetings equated to nothing more than drawn-out kumbaya sessions. We could gather for a moment, but how could we live together if more affluent newer residents could afford to stay, and others could not afford the area’s new cost of living. United communities are only possible if there is collective liberation.

We should ask the question, what does collective liberation look like? What does a community or country look like if everyone has the same freedom? It seems that freedom comes in bits and pieces. Therefore, we have seen collective liberation in

fragments but not as a whole. We see it with the progression of voting rights. Voting started in the 1700s, with only white male property owners having the right to vote in the United States of America. When Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, it was supposed to be collective liberation.¹ Now all Americans have the freedom to participate in the democratic process. The sequence was similar to the rights to purchase land and obtain an education. At first, it was a privilege for only a few to buy a home or enter college, but eventually, everyone was supposed to have the freedom to do these things.

We aim for collective liberation, but we constantly miss the mark, even in the Church. In early America, Black parishioners were not allowed to take communion or sit next to their white counterparts in worship services. Imagine listening to the gospel message of freedom from the back of the church, sitting in the rear only because you did not have the freedom to sit in the front. Yet they sat there because the message made sense to them even if the acts of the church did not. We may not know what collective liberation looks like, but we do know what it sounds like. It sounds like Galatians 3:28, where it says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” It sounds like the gospel message, and it sounds like Liberation Theology.

¹ Michael Bernard Burgan, *You Choose: The Voting Rights Act of 1965* (Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2015), 104.

Introduction to Liberation Theology

“Liberation theology generally refers to a theology applied to the core concerns of marginalized communities in need of social, political, or economic equality and justice.”² It is the message that the Black parishioners seated in the back of white congregations in the 1700s needed to hear. They needed to know that they did not have to worship under those conditions. There are many facets of Liberation Theology and although the term was coined in the 1960s, it is without question that this ideology was practiced long before then. There could be no African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church without it. A.M.E. Zion pastors understand the necessity of integrating this theology into our sermons and teachings. The message of freedom is part of our long-standing history. We were coined the Freedom Church for a reason. The A.M.E. Zion archives reveal a roster of abolitionists on the membership roll that include Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth. Liberation was not only our message; it was also our labor.

It may have been a sermon that encouraged Andrew Williams to purchase land in 1825, at a time when there were few Black property owners. Congregants have always been strongly influenced by the messages they hear on a weekly basis from the pulpit. Williams, a trustee at Mother A.M.E. Zion Church, must have heard that he was indeed a child of God. Despite the law of the country that oppressed Black people in 1825, Williams had the audacity to believe he had the freedom to own land. Furthermore, with land ownership came other freedoms like the right to vote.

² Anthony Bradley, “Liberation Theology,” Oxford Bibliographies, last modified June 28, 2016, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0019.xml>.

It was not solely the theology being preached that influenced the members, but it was the actions that accompanied the message. The actions must have spoken just as loudly as the sermons. The emergence of Black churches in the United States in the late 1700s was an act of Liberation Theology in and of itself. The courage to worship in the face of racism allowed Black Americans to exercise freedom, and that freedom trickled down to every area of their lives.

A Look at Liberation Theology and Black Liberation Theology

It is true that “liberation theologies existed long before they became academic disciplines in both the Latin American and African American contexts.”³ However, we must pause here to look at these disciplines from the academic perspective to better understand where the movement has been and where it is going.

Liberation Theology as an academic discipline is traced back to Latin America in the 1960s. At this time, Christian faith leaders started to question the poor living conditions of their parishioners, in contrast to the wealth of religious and governmental systems. Faith leaders, particularly in the Catholic Church in Latin America, were bothered by the fact that the Church was so wealthy, yet the people were so poor. The people were suffering, and though they remained faithful to the Church, something was off kilter. Giving voice to this issue soon became a movement and, eventually, developed into a school of thought we know today as Liberation Theology.

Prominent Voices of Liberation Theology

³ Bradley, “Liberation Theology.”

One of the prominent voices of this movement was Óscar Romero. Óscar Arnulfo Romero was a native of El Salvador, born to a large family in the early 1900s. He knew that he was called to be a priest at an early age. He wanted to completely commit himself to the work of the Church and be well prepared for his call, so he traveled to Rome, Italy. It was in Rome that he was ordained and studied at the Gregorian University, graduating with a doctoral degree in 1943. He eventually returned to El Salvador where he served in parish ministry for twenty years.

When Óscar Romero entered ministry, he was considered a traditional conservative cleric, and he gradually climbed the clerical hierarchy. He assumed the position as director of the archdiocesan newspaper *Orientación*, and in 1977, he was elevated to the office of archbishop. He continued to serve in his homeland of El Salvador. The country was dealing with a lot of unrest and was entering into a civil war at the time when he was appointed as archbishop. People quickly picked sides in the conflict, including clergy. Many fell victim to political violence, including Father Rutilio Grande. Father Grande was an activist for the poor and a friend of Óscar Romero. When Grande was assassinated, Romero's political position changed considerably.

Romero's heart grieved for his friend and his homeland. He started openly addressing the plight of the oppressed in his speeches and sermons⁴ The United States got involved in the war when the El Salvadoran government made its citizens comply with their new regime using force, including execution. These measures were supported by the United States government. So, Archbishop Romero wrote a letter to President Jimmy

⁴ Rothko Chapel, "The Violence of Love: The Legacy of Archbishop Óscar Romero 2.27.2014," Rothko Chapel, streamed live on March 26, 2014, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/90130407>.

Carter, asking him to stop providing military support to the El Salvadoran government, to no avail. He was on the front lines in El Salvador, yet no one was hearing his cries or the cries of his people. He did everything he could to make the world aware of the plight of the poor in El Salvador. The poor were those most affected by the civil war and had no way of protecting themselves. Romero even traveled back across the pond to inform Pope John Paul II of the atrocities happening in El Salvador. He fought for his people to be liberated from political oppression, and thus, he became a liberation theologian and activist.

He attempted to use his influence as an archbishop to oppose the government, and since he was the director of the *Orientación* newspaper, he began publishing articles addressing these issues. *Orientación* was uncensored by the government and became the voice of the people. His newspaper reported the things that other papers would not, such as the names of victims of death squads and killings of Catholic priests that opposed the government. Romero also used his weekly radio program to report the same. The popularity of his radio program grew, and soon, the whole country was aware of the corruption. He had to know that publicizing his position and opposing the government would make him a target and put his life in jeopardy.⁵

He was assassinated March 24, 1980 when a lone gunman at a distance used a rifle to kill Romero as he was serving mass. Romero's murder was heinous and the reason for his assassination was obvious.⁶ He had become too outspoken. He gave voice

⁵ Oscar Arnulfo Romero, *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People: The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero* (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2015), 150.

⁶ Seán-Patrick Lovett, "Remembering St Oscar Romero: 40 Years after His Assassination," *Vatican News*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-03/oscar-romero-forty-years-assassination-anniversary0.html>.

to the voiceless, and in the tradition of Jesus, fighting for the poor always comes at a cost. Romero paid for it with his life. Although he died at the hands of violence, he encouraged his listeners to seek reconciliation and not violence. He once wrote,

I am a minister of this Church of reconciliation and so I was very happy with the proposal made to me that the church must not only denounce what is wrong but must also announce hope. One good reason for hope is that the church's view coincides with the views of many others and there is therefore a need to begin a sincere dialogue among people of different opinions. I urge everyone then not to believe that violence is the only solution and like Saint Paul, I call everyone to engage in sincere dialogue and to seek reconciliation in God's name.⁷

Although Romero is gone, prayerfully, the dialogue he encouraged continues.

Another voice for Liberation Theology was James Cone. Cone was responsible for introducing Black Liberation Theology to academia. This school of theology was birthed on U.S. soil. James Hal Cone was born in Arkansas in 1938 during the Jim Crow Era. Cone earned both his M.A. degree and his Ph.D. in systematic theology from Northwestern University, and served as an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He is the father of Black Liberation Theology, a school of Christian theology based on African American experience, culture, and history.

Black Liberation Theology maintains that God identifies with the oppressed and always has. It runs the gamut from Exodus to the gospels. It was God who delivered the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt. It was God who allowed his son Jesus to be born into a marginalized Jewish community; a community that was under oppressive Roman occupation. It is recorded in Luke 4:18 that Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

⁷ Óscar A Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2018), 56.

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” Black Theologians believe without question that God is indeed the God of the oppressed. It can be argued that Cone was not the first intellectual to draw attention to the association between Jesus and the oppressed. “Howard Thurman had made the point forcefully back in 1949 with his book ‘Jesus and the Disinherited.’ However, historical circumstances of the mid-1960s demanded that the connection between Jesus, the Christian faith and Black communities in the United States be reexamined.”⁸

Cone was lending his voice to theology during the heart of the Civil Rights movement.⁹ His points challenged white Christian leaders who were silent on the subject of racism. It also challenged Black Christian leaders who encouraged their parishioners to comply with rules of systematic racism. Silence on matters of race by preachers during the civil rights movement, whether Black or white, was considered complacency by many in the Black community. When looking back on the civil rights movement now, we highlight the clergy leaders at the forefront like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, the truth of the matter is that King and his colleagues were more of an anomaly. Black Americans began to question if they could be both Black and Christian, and Cone’s Black Liberation Theology addressed the matter head on. Unlike European-based theology, he contended that Black theology pulled from a different biblical interpretation that was directly correlated with the experience of being Black in the United States. As Black

⁸ Marvin A. McMickle, “A Look at James Cone and Black Theology,” *The Christian Citizen*, June 6, 2018, <https://medium.com/christian-citizen/a-look-at-james-cone-and-black-theology-e4a3ae2c6938>.

⁹ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

Theology expanded, it became clear that the Black experience was shared across the world. Branches of this theology began to pop up in places such as the Caribbean, Brazil, South Africa, and among Black communities in Europe. Although the context was somewhat different, the common experience of being Black and treated differently because of skin color was shared internationally.

Cone challenged clergy persons to speak truth to power and not ignore the plight of the Black and poor community. He wrote in his book *My Soul Looks Back* that “like white churches, black denominations that ignored the liberation of the poor as their central message were not the people of God but rather the agents of the anti-Christ.”¹⁰

Though you will not find them listed among the names of liberation theologians, it only makes sense to add James Varick and Richard Allen to this section. These men were founding fathers of the two oldest historical Black Methodist denominations in the world. They have something to contribute to this discussion. Before Cone and Romero, we had Varick and Allen.

Richard Allen was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and raised in Delaware. In his teens, he converted to Methodism and, at the age of twenty-two, began preaching even though he was enslaved at the time. While still in bondage, he attended the first general conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Maryland. Because he was a gifted and anointed preacher, Allen was presented as a candidate for ministry. In 1786, when he purchased his freedom, he moved to Philadelphia and joined St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church. He was allowed to preach to the congregation on occasion and permitted to lead prayer meetings for Black members.

¹⁰ James H. Cone, *My Soul Look Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 66.

However, there were restrictions put in place to closely monitor the Black members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Restrictions included the number of people allowed to attend Black prayer meetings. Allen and several other members were frustrated with the restraints placed on Black parishioners. Therefore, in 1787, Richard Allen withdrew from that church. That year he also formed the first Black Methodist Church in the United States today known as the (A.M.E.) African Methodist Episcopal Church.

It was a denomination formed as a result of racial discrimination, not theological differences. For this reason, in 1799, Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal Church ordained Allen to be the first minister to serve this newly formed Black Methodist society. Allen and his new group were partially still connected to the Methodist Episcopal Church, although there was still racial discrimination there. So, in 1807 and 1815, Allen sued and won in the courts to establish the newly formed Black congregation independent from the white Methodist Church. After agreeing to adopt the official Methodist doctrine and discipline, Bishop Asbury consecrated Allen the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 and it was incorporated.

There was a significant period of growth that occurred in the A.M.E. Church. As the Civil War was coming to an end, there was a call to evangelize those who were newly free. A.M.E. congregations grew rapidly in the south and by 1880 membership had reached over 400,000. The African Methodist Church was Liberation Theology not in theory but in action. It must have felt liberating for formerly enslaved people to find Black churches welcoming them as they made their exodus from the evil of chattel

slavery. Their freedom was made more tangible by the experience of worship without the oversight of white slave owners.

Although Black Americans would go on to experience Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and the civil rights movement, they would sojourn with a church of their own as their backbone. The early Black Methodist Church had many abolitionists as members. Both the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion Church were full of freedom fighters— members who were inevitably impacted by the power of Black church liberation. Often freedom is not realized until it is experienced. Richard Allen opened the doors for Liberation Theology before it had a name or place in seminary classrooms. Richard Allen, a man who was born into slavery and went on to purchase his freedom, was the embodiment of liberation.

James Varick had a similar experience to Allen, one hundred miles northeast in New York City. Varick was born near Newburgh, New York in 1750. His mother was a slave, and his father was free. His mother was manumitted when Varick was a child; therefore, he did not have to purchase his freedom. He came to live in New York City as a teenager and joined the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Manhattan.¹¹

At first, the number of white members superseded the number of Black members at John Street, but as the Black membership grew, so did the racism. Soon segregation reared its ugly head at the church. The Black members were told that they now had to sit in the back pews. In response to these new restrictions, a group of Black members led by Varick left the church. They obtained permission to have separate services for the Black

¹¹ Derry Presbyterian Church, “History of the AME Zion Church, Part 2,” Streamed live on October 3, 2021, YouTube video, 57:16, https://www.youtube.com/live/8RJQC6c7_lg?feature=share.

congregants in 1796. This was the birth of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. It would be several years before the church was officially incorporated.

Varick was a prolific preacher and was one of the three Black men ordained in New York City in 1806. Soon after forming the A.M.E. Zion Church in New York City, James Varick was able to establish churches in New Haven, Connecticut in 1818, and in Philadelphia in 1820. At this point in history, the Zion Church was still a part of the white Methodist denomination. Although Black ministers were allowed to preach, they were paid significantly less than their white counterparts or paid nothing at all. The Black members of the church fought for two decades to separate from the Methodist Episcopal Church, so they would no longer be under their dictatorship. In a very real sense, they gained their independence and

independent black churches were not separatists in the strict sense. They were not separating themselves from whites because they held a different doctrinal view of Christianity. Without exception blacks used the same articles of faith and polity for their churches as the white denominations from which they separated. Separation, for blacks, meant that they were rejecting the ethical behavior of whites, they were rejecting racism that was based on the assumption that God created blacks inferior to whites.¹²

Varick never allowed racial discrimination to stop him from working effectively in ministry, in many facets.

He was named the first chaplain of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in 1810. In 1817 he became one of the vice presidents of the New York African Bible Society. Having been deeply influenced by the spirit of the revolution, in 1821 he joined a group of Black businessmen and clergy and petitioned the New York State Constitutional Convention for black suffrage.¹³

¹² James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcom and American: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 6–7.

¹³ Encyclopedia.com, s.v. “Varick, James,” accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/varick-james>.

He was one of the founders of the *Freedom Journal*, the first Black newspaper in the United States.

Varick would go on to become the first bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and he served the church until his death in 1827. It is without question that Liberation Theology was not only what Varick preached; it is what he lived. Many A.M.E. Zion Churches across the United States and abroad are named in his honor. As an A.M.E. Zion pastor, I strive to carry the mantle that Bishop Varick handed down to us. I must speak up whenever I see injustice. Liberation Theology is always incorporated in the work that I do because until all of us are free, none of us are totally free. The A.M.E. Zion church maintains its title as the Freedom Church and must continue work while it is yet day.

Who Needs to be Liberated?

If liberation is the theological foundation for this doctoral project, we must ask the question: Who are we freeing and from what? Let us return to the title of this doctoral project “Where Will the Poor People Go?” We are working towards freeing poor people. The question of where they will go is not rhetorical. As a result of gentrification, poor people are more transient than ever. They are moving from place to place, trying to find somewhere they can afford to live. However, that task has become increasingly difficult with rent prices rising nationwide.

Before exploring the solutions to the problem, we must take a moment to study poverty within the framework of Liberation Theology. What does the Bible say about poverty? The Bible gives clear instructions that the poor are to be cared for. The following

scriptures state it directly. Deuteronomy 15:10 states, “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.” Proverbs 19:17 states, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.” Proverbs 22:9 states, “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.”

A poor person can be defined as an individual that lacks food, money, and other resources. We cannot ignore the fact that in the Bible, however, the poor are directly linked to the Lord. It says in Proverbs 19:17 that a person that lends to the poor lends to the Lord. This provides those that have the means to give with an opportunity to minister through generosity. Poor people are not to be pushed around or discarded, they are to be treated with special love and care. God could have had Jesus born into a rich, affluent family. God could have used a royal family to raise Jesus, but he chose Mary and Joseph, a working-class family of meager means. To give to the poor is literally to give to the Lord.

Poverty by our definition may be something entirely different and changes from one context to the next. From personal experience growing up in Asbury Park, New Jersey in the eighties and nineties, it was a poor working-class community that had pulled itself up out of a devastating riot that took place in the summer of 1970. There were middle-class families that resided there, but there was certainly poverty. Yet, the lower-income and middle-class families coexisted more cohesively than what was seen in recent

years.¹⁴ I had friends that one would consider poor, but I do not remember that interfering with our relationship. I had seen poverty secondhand when I went to visit my friends' homes or noticed that their clothes were tattered. If one family did not have a vehicle, we would simply ride to school or the grocery store together. There were always indicators of poverty. I knew what poverty looked like but only from my context as someone who grew up in an urban city in the United States.

I was fortunate enough to have opportunities to travel with my family when I was an adolescent. That is when I started to see poverty in different countries and realized that poverty is defined differently in different contexts. The poorest families I knew in New Jersey still had running water, but in certain provinces in Mexico and Haiti, I witnessed children fetching water from rivers. Traveling was an eye-opening experience.

It made me think about the scripture found in the Gospel of Mark 10:25, which says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Before traveling I was certain that the rich lived in mansions on the other side of town, but now I had to consider that the text might be referring to me. Were we rich by biblical definition because we were able to travel? In the eyes of people from underdeveloped countries were Americans those that would have trouble getting into heaven? A personal frame of reference can shape the way we identify the poor, but a personal encounter with Jesus can impact how we view and treat them.

¹⁴ Alan Mallach, *The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 68.

The Chains of Poverty

Liberation Theology works to free people from social, political, and economic oppression. All three forms of oppression were being conducted through gentrification. Just as Romero saw the plight of the people while serving in El Salvador, the plight is seen by a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church serving those in Black Urban Communities.¹⁵ Our denomination is one of the oldest historical Black churches in the United States. Our churches are often situated in communities that were once thriving Black neighborhoods, like Harlem and Schenectady, New York and Asbury Park, New Jersey. These were areas where Black Americans were forced to reside due to segregation, redlining, and the lack of safety in the 1800s and 1900s. These areas were also attractive to Black Americans for distinct reasons during different eras.

Schenectady, New York was a safe haven for Black Americans in the late 1700s and 1800s because it was far enough from the Mason-Dixon line during American Slavery and the Civil War. Fugitive slaves had to make their way towards the north when escaping the southern confederate states. Slavery was still legal in the north at that time, but the northern states were more liberal and stood against the oppressive slavery laws of that time. The farther north fugitive slaves traveled, the better chances they had of staying free. Furthermore, the northern states were full of abolitionists both Black and white, who were eager to see slavery abolished. The closer one got to Canada, the better.

The church I currently pastor is in what is called the Hamilton Hill Section of Schenectady, basically the “Black Section” of town. One will find areas like these in

¹⁵ James H. Cone, and Cornel West, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 107.

most urban cities. Black people gravitated to areas that were safe for them to live and had job opportunities, and this usually resulted in Black areas in many cities, especially factory towns. Historical Black Churches were always a part of the structure of these areas. In some cases, the church members and leaders were the founders of these new fledging societies.

In the 1800s, Black Americans were often looking for three things: a place where they could live relatively safe from slavery and white rage; sufficient jobs that would pay the bills and keep food on the table;¹⁶ and houses of worship. They looked for churches that preached the gospel truth rather than an oppressive whitewashed Christianity that did not align with the Jesus they knew. Places like Schenectady and Asbury Park had the three key factors of good jobs, neighborhoods that welcomed Black people, and Black churches.

Freedom from Economic Oppression

The end of the Civil War overlapped with an industrial boom in the United States. Factories started popping up throughout the country, and wherever there were factories, there were jobs. History records that Oliver Evans built the first flour mill in 1785 in Delaware. However, it was not until the 1860s that the country started to experience an industrial boom in urban centers. Soon after, in 1913, the assembly line was created and there were manufacturing jobs galore. Even though the Great Depression started to affect all industries in 1929, the manufacturing industry was quick to bounce back. This was

¹⁶ Gene Slater, *Freedom to Discriminate: How Realtors Conspired to Segregate Housing and Divide America* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2021), 281.

mostly due to the supply and demand created by World War II. There was a time in our not-so-distant past when factory jobs provided economic freedom for the Black community.

This is how my family came to live in New Jersey. My grandmother Clara Bowens grew up between Folkston, Georgia and Palatka, Florida. She was a hard worker, but did not have a high school diploma and struggled to make ends meet and care for her children. Then she received a phone call from one of her cousins who had moved to Farmingdale, New Jersey. Her cousin and her family had been settled there for a few years. These calls from New Jersey were full of tales of economic freedom. It was a form of liberation theology being preached over the phone.

Cousin Merl would tell my grandmother about everything New Jersey had to offer. “Boots”—that is what they called my grandma—“they always got jobs up here. And you are a hard worker, y’all make more money than what you do working at Ted & Mary’s.” Ted and Mary’s was the name of a diner my grandmother worked at in Florida. My grandma recounted Cousin Merl saying,

Boots, we got us a house on an acre of land up here, plenty of room for the children to play. If you come up here you can stay with us ‘til you get on your feet . . . they got some fiery preachers up here. These Black churches got pastors with a word. I joined a church right up the road.

My grandmother was sold on the idea of moving to New Jersey. In 1966, she packed up and moved herself and her family to central New Jersey and never looked back.

For her and many others, the manufacturing jobs in the Northeast offered liberation from economic oppression. Additionally, the pastors were preaching fiery sermons that painted a picture of a liberation that had not yet been experienced. In the Black Community liberation seems to be coming in stages and, unfortunately, we are still

fighting for our full freedom. My grandmother's first pastor in New Jersey was Reverend Carter. I never met Reverend Carter. He died before I was born, but I have met his sermons. My grandma would share with me the messages he preached and how he spoke of freedom from segregation, racism, and sin. He was a fiery preacher for sure and assured his members that Jesus cared about the condition of the Black community in America. God was, indeed, with them in their fight for equality. God was not watching from the sidelines.

Liberation Theology is still preached from the pulpit today, and needs to be; yet, it goes beyond preaching. Liberation Theology requires action, marching, demanding, and protesting. One movement that captures all of this is the Poor People's Campaign. It is Liberation Theology in motion.

The Poor People's Campaign

The Poor People's Campaign was a political campaign that came together in 1968. It started with a demonstration in Washington, DC called the Poor People's March. The people demanded that the government deal with the issues facing poor people in the United States. They wanted the housing and employment problems addressed, in particular. The year prior to the campaign's launch, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, of which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was president, met to discuss this endeavor. The Poor People's Campaign focused on solutions to end poverty. This campaign was a continuation of the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement had gained some ground. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were wins for the movement, and this was the next step towards full liberation. "The

SCLC's aim for the Poor People's Campaign was to address broadly economic inequalities with nonviolent direct action. The SCLC's vision was that the campaign would be the most sustainable, massive, and widespread effort of civil disobedience undertaken by any social movement in U.S. history."¹⁷

The Poor People's Campaign was different from the civil rights movement in that it was more inclusive. The idea was not to just fight for the rights of Black people, but all people. Poverty affected people from many cultural backgrounds. Native Americans, white Americans, Hispanic Americans, and African Americans, mostly from urban and rural areas, were experiencing poverty in this country at disproportionate rates. The plan was for demonstrators that represented America's diversity to march on the capital for forty days from May 14 to June 24 of 1968. Perhaps, deciding to march for forty days had some biblical influence. The plan was to demand a twelve billion-dollar Economic Bill of Rights. This would free many Americans from the bondage of poverty.

Before the Poor People's Campaign could launch on May 14, the leader of the movement, King, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, in April 1968. At the time of his assassination, King was already engrossed in the work of the campaign. He was in Memphis to support the sanitation workers in the city who were being poorly paid. He knew that his presence would bring awareness to their cause, and it aligned with the mission of the pending Poor People's Campaign. Many, but not all the sanitation workers, were African American. We should not overlook the fact that King was

¹⁷ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Poor People's Campaign," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified November 18, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Poor-Peoples-March>.

assassinated when it became clear that the scope of his work expanded beyond the Black community.

Exodus 1:9–10

There is something about people of diverse groups coming together to fight for their rights that always frightens the authorities, which is similar to the story in Exodus 1:9–10 in the Old Testament. It states, “‘Look,’” he said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us, and leave the country.’”

The new king of Egypt was scared that the Israelites might join forces with other nations and revolt against them. This was also the concern of the United States government. What if poor white, Black, Latinx, and Native Americans realize that they have more in common than they think? What if they join efforts and demand equity and equality? King was on a path to truly unifying this country. This made him a bigger threat to the government than he was while fighting for voting rights and integration. He was about to shake the capitalist infrastructure of America.

King’s longtime friend and partner in the struggle, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, picked up the baton after King was killed. The Poor People’s March took place on June 19, 1968, but the movement had been shaken. The demonstration was smaller than they anticipated. However, they pushed forward setting up a camp called Resurrection City on the grounds near the Lincoln Memorial Monument. Resurrection City was short-lived. The camp only lasted for five days. It was forced to shut down when more than one-hundred protestors were arrested on site. They resisted but were forcibly removed by

National Guardsmen. “The Poor People’s Campaign fell short of its goal to win significant antipoverty legislation. It did, however, mark a change of the civil rights movement from advocating a platform of only racial equality to one that incorporated interracial class issues and economic goals.”¹⁸

The Struggle Continues

In more recent years, William Barber and his organization “Repairers of the Breach” have picked up the pieces and put the Poor People’s Campaign back together. “In 2017, drawing on the unfinished work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, which called for a “revolution of values,” “Repairers of the Breach” partnered with the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice, and hundreds of local and national organizations, to launch the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.”¹⁹ Barber and his partners were very inspired by the work of King and decided to pick up the mantle and run with it.

Barber is a true Liberation Theologian, who is the President of the Repairers of the Breach organization and Co-Chair of the new Poor People’s Campaign. William Barber is a clergyman who heeds to his call to be prophetic. He is the Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He is also a consecrated bishop, professor, and author. King’s vision is in good hands, but for a People’s Campaign to be successful, it needs people. For further study, consider joining and visiting www.poorpeoplescampaign.org to learn more.

¹⁸ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Poor People’s Campaign.”

¹⁹ “Poor People’s Campaign,” Repairers of the Breach, accessed March 3, 2023. <https://www.breachrepairers.org/poor-peoples-campaign>.

Conclusion

Liberation Theology is alive and well, and clearly, its message is still needed. There exist criticisms about Black preachers who preach Liberation Theology. They have been called un-American, ironically, by conservative Christians most of the time. A prime example of this is Reverend Raphael Warnock. Reverend Warnock is the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The historical church was once pastored by Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. Warnock is also a United States Senator. When he ran for office in 2020, his opponents tried to use his theology against him. Knowing he was a community pastor with a history of fighting for social justice, they went searching through his old sermons. Using his sermons against him, his opponents specifically looked for sermons inspired by Liberation Theology. He was painted as a radical, unpatriotic liberal who had no business in office in Georgia. Reverend Warnock was elected, despite the mudslinging, or perhaps because of it, depending on who you are asking. It is a gross misconception that Liberation Theology has stalled the Black church. Antagonists claim that if Black preachers would only stick to preaching the gospel message, things would be better in the Black community. The question is, how do you preach the gospel message without touching on liberation?

Jesus was not silent on issues of oppression. Once again examining the Gospel of Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,” you cannot circumvent the subject of liberation. It is an important part of the gospel message. The gospel message of love

should be preached side by side with the message of liberation. If you love me, you should want to see me liberated. If you love me, you should want to see me free.

This school of theology speaks directly to the issues that gentrification creates. The displacement of poor people is not a new issue. It can be traced back to biblical times. The question is, when will we apply biblical principles to resolve the issues rather than justify them? “In Christianity there is renewed interest in the study of money, economics, and class in Christian thought and practice with a desire to undo how Christianity has been bound up in the values of empire and capitalism.”²⁰ If poor people were free, they would not be able to be pushed around repeatedly. The freedom to live somewhere without fear of being priced out should be a standard and not a privilege. Something must be done about the displacement of poor people. It is time that we use our prophetic voice to free our brothers and sisters from oppressive poverty because, as John 8:36 indicates, whom the son sets free should be free indeed!

²⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 49.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Urban Studies is the school of thought that examines the development of urban cities. The focus of this chapter is gentrification. Gentrification is an experience that is happening in many urban cities. Therefore, the study of this discipline is essential to my research. Urban studies merge the respective disciplines of geography, economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, architecture, urban design, and urban planning. This doctoral project will not allow the time to dissect each of these disciplines separately. However, this chapter will modestly touch on each subject. To tackle the problems that gentrification creates, we must take a close look at the issues surrounding changing metropolitan dynamics. Some of the cities we will look at are undergoing urbanization. Urbanization is the process of making an area more urban. However, gentrification is not exclusively happening in urban areas. Even rural areas are subject to it. It is predominantly happening in low-income and poor working-class communities, which are areas where people can be priced out of their homes.

One of the things considered in urban studies is locational analysis. “Locational analysis, identified primarily with the work of urban economists and urban geographers, is concerned with intraurban spatial patterns of urban land use and the accessibility of

central business districts.”¹ Until this point, I have always been on the receiving end of gentrification. I was a long-term resident susceptible to displacement. I can be included in the group of people that gentrification puts at a disadvantage. It took me a long time to realize that someone had analyzed the city I lived in and determined it was a pre-emerging community. I recently learned that “pre-emerging community” is a term used by real estate investors. I will explain that term in more detail later.

As we embark upon this study, we must clearly define what an urban city is. The government and United States census consider urban areas to be the sections of the country that are densely populated, and have residential and commercial zones combined. Those of us who are not urban economists but grew up in these cities identify urban areas as places where we can find a good bodega on the corner. We grew up seeing buildings where apartments are located on top of laundromats or shopping plazas. We had not considered that the neighborhoods we lived in had such high populations that there was not enough space to build out, so real estate was structured to go up. There are more apartment buildings in these cities to accommodate the substantial number of residents. Unbeknown to us, we were the subject of urban studies and pawns for investors and developers.

Asbury Park Before Gentrification

I grew up in a small urban city in Central New Jersey in the eighties and nineties. The city of Asbury Park is only 1.6 square miles. My parents were a part of the tail end of the great migration generation. Their parents had migrated north for job opportunities. I

¹ “Urban Studies (Social Science),” What-When-How: In Depth Tutorials and Information, accessed February 23, 2023, <http://what-when-how.com/social-sciences/urban-studies-social-science/>.

grew up in the same area as my parents. Although my grandparents came to the state as adults, my parents both attended elementary school in the area. My father and I were even born in the same hospital. Despite these specifics, the similarities stopped there. My father entered high school as the local school district was being integrated. He has shared with me the positives and negatives of his experience with integration. Yet, by the time he graduated high school, the district was amalgamated, and whites and Blacks shared classroom space without much incident.

By the time I had entered high school all of that had changed. I could count on my fingers the number of white students in my classes. The city was not remarkably diverse at all regarding ethnicity. However, we were sundry when it came to nationalities. We had students from Jamaica, Haiti, South America, the West Indies, and other islands in the Caribbean. There was a plethora of languages heard in the hallways but not much variation in color. The district was mostly made up of Black and Brown students. Urban Studies can help us to identify how this demographic shift occurred.

We might pinpoint a few causes when trying to analyze the demographic shift. The change that happened in Asbury Park between the seventies and eighties occurred in many areas across the country. Multiethnic communities shifted to more homogeneous neighborhoods soon after integration. How ironic, when the point of ending segregation, was to diversify and unify. Redlining is one of the reasons this shift occurred.

The History of Redlining

In the 1920s and 1930s America was devastated by the Great Depression. The unemployment rate skyrocketed, leaving a quarter of the country out of work, and most

that remained employed had their earnings cut in half. This resulted in more than one million Americans facing foreclosure. In the face of this economic crisis, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a home buying program that catered to white Americans only. The National Housing Act of 1934 endorsed homeownership by offering loans backed by the federal government with guaranteed approval for mortgages. This program was facilitated by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Assistance was only given to potential white buyers.

“The FHA had a manual which explicitly said that it was risky to make mortgage loans in predominantly Black areas,” explains Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation who has written about housing segregation in the United States. “And so as a result, the federal subsidy for home ownership went almost entirely to white people.” The assistance program not only limited recipients to white Americans, it established and then reinforced housing segregation in the United States, effectively drawing lines between white and Black neighborhoods that would persist for generations.²

These loan programs gave the opportunity for white residents in urban cities to move to what would become the suburbs. Suburban living must have been very appealing. When Roosevelt’s Housing Act was introduced in 1934, African Americans had only been emancipated for sixty-nine years and still suffered under a stigma of inferiority. After desegregation, many white residents moved to make sure that their children would not have to go to school with Black classmates. Also, fleeing to an all-white suburb would allow them to achieve a higher social status. Living in the city among Blacks was looked down upon. By denying Black Americans access to homeownership in the suburban areas, President Roosevelt opened the doors for redlining.

² Becky Little, “How a New Deal Housing Program Enforced Segregation,” History.com, October 20, 2020, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/housing-segregation-new-deal-program>.

Redlining became the discriminatory practice of putting services, including but not limited to home loans, out of reach for certain people based on race. It is said that redlining was and still is illegal. However, how could that be true if it was initiated by a government program? The National Housing Act of 1934 opened the door for redlining. Redlining opened the door for White Flight, and gentrification by all accounts is reverse White Flight. It is white Americans returning to communities they once turned their backs on, buying up the cities from which they once ran.

White Flight hurt many neighborhoods across the country from the 1930s to the – 1980s, which were once diverse and on the road to integration. These communities suffered in many ways. Retail businesses lost customers. School districts suffered as funding was taken away due to declines in enrollment. These areas, which were once healthy, working-class neighborhoods, plunged into poverty.

This plunge into poverty was well planned, executed and documented. Jason Reece, assistant professor of City and Regional Planning at Ohio State University, wrote an article in 2021 titled “Confronting the Legacy of ‘Separate but Equal:’ Can the History of Race, Real Estate, and Discrimination Engage and Inform Contemporary Policy?” In this article, he cites many professionals in the field of Urban Studies who shed light on my project. Gentrification is no haphazard occurrence. It is a continuation of a system of segregation that was implemented a long time ago. Perhaps, one could say that gentrification is the grandchild of redlining. We as Americans need to come to terms with the fact that we cannot correct and redirect the future if we do not truthfully analyze our history. Therefore, the idea of incorporating Critical Race Theory into new curriculums is presently a hot bed discussion. It is an attempt to study the systems that brought us to our

current state. Reece's article presents a great argument as to why an examination of our history of housing discrimination is critical to this doctoral project. Urban Studies tell us why this form of discrimination is still widespread. Raising rent astronomically across this nation without raising the minimum wage is discrimination and makes gentrification possible. However, this form of oppression is nothing new.

History will reflect on this subject and tell the story from both sides as it should. There are often two sides to every story, and although the stories may be polar opposites, they may both be true. When we look back on Roosevelt's National Housing Act of 1934, it can be said that it boosted homeownership and fostered new neighborhoods. When we re-examine gentrification, some will point out that it revitalized cities and improved urban public-school education. It will also be documented that it forced low-income families from their communities and eliminated access to affordable housing. One of the questions at the core of this project, is has housing discrimination gotten better or worse? One researcher states, "Twenty-first-century cities in the United States remain highly segregated along the dimensions of race and class. Rates of residential segregation, though, have consistently declined in recent decades."³ A decline in residential segregation is a good indicator that communities are again integrating, and we must not let the displacement of poor people set that back. If we continue in the direction we are going regarding racial makeup, these communities may diversify. However, when it comes to class, it will not. Black and Brown people who can afford to stay or move can make the community multiethnic but not necessarily multi-economic. "Segregation is not

³ William Frey, "Black-White Segregation Edges Downward Since 2000, Census Shows," *The Avenue* (Brookings Institution blog), December 18, 2018, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/black-white-segregation-edges-downward-since-2000-census-shows/>.

racial separation alone, but also separation into areas of intense poverty and separation from opportunity structures.”⁴ The displacement of poor people continues a vicious cycle in this country that pushes people to the margins time and time again. Our brothers and sisters cannot get a leg up if we keep pulling the rug from under them every time, they get their footing.

Cities on Fire

It would behoove us to also take time to analyze cities where race riots happened in the 1960s and 1970s. For conceivable reasons, we might understand why people left communities where riots occurred and businesses were burned to the ground. Presently, these cities are prime locations for gentrification. The riot in Asbury Park happened in July of 1970. This event changed the city forever, and riots like this one are not unique, as similar uprisings have happened in urban cities all over the United States.

Asbury Park Summer of 1970

There was an article published in the journal *New Jersey Studies* in July of 2016.⁵ Daniel Weeks authored this article, and it was nostalgic. Because of family roots in Asbury Park, there were personal experiences with many people he interviewed. For example, Donald Hammary was a local business owner who owned a candy store in the neighborhood. He also interviewed Reverend Matthew, the pastor of the church where I was christened and baptized. This article mentioned many familiar people and never

⁴ John Powell, “Opportunity-Based Housing,” *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law* 12, no. 2 (2003): 188–228.

⁵ Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt,” 80–111.

considered their experience in the riot until now. They lived through what was one of Asbury Park's darkest days.

Civil unrest shook Asbury Park, New Jersey for four days in July of 1970. Years later, the question that remains is, was this a violent riot, justifiable revolt, or was it a little bit of both? Twenty-two-year-old Harold Suggs, who lived in Asbury Park, was home for the summer. He was a journalism student at Murray State University in Kentucky. Of course, as a journalism student, he had his camera with him. He rushed out to Springwood Avenue to see what was going on, and he also hoped to get some photos he could sell to the newspapers. "The event was serious enough to receive extensive coverage, not only in the local papers, but also in the New York Times and on the major television networks. The governor sent in 150 state troopers, and in the aftermath, asked President Nixon to declare the city a disaster area."⁶ At the end of the tumultuous four days, 180 people had been injured, and there was more than \$4 million in damages. The rampage that went on for half a week received media coverage. However, the coverage was no comparison to that received by Los Angeles, California, Detroit, Michigan, or Newark, New Jersey. These cities experienced what history books refer to as the "major race riots" of the sixties.

The 1960s saw the most serious and widespread series of race riots in the history of the United States. Major riots occurred in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963; New York City in 1964; Watts in Los Angeles, California, in 1965; and Chicago, Illinois, in 1966. In 1967, alone, Tampa, Florida; Cincinnati, Ohio; Atlanta, Georgia; Newark, Plainfield, and New Brunswick, New Jersey; and Detroit, Michigan, all had riots. Riots erupted in more than 110 U.S. cities on April 4, 1968, the night civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) was assassinated.⁷

⁶ Weeks, "From Riot to Revolt," ""80.

⁷ "Race Riots of the 1960s," Encyclopedia.com, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/race-riots-1960s>.

Asbury Park was a much smaller city, and fortunately no one died in the riot that happened there. There were lots of injuries but no deaths. As morbid as it may sound, historians and researchers tend to measure the magnitude of civil unrest by its death toll. This is one of the reasons there is limited research on the Asbury Park Riot.

Another reason scholars tend to overlook the events that happened in Asbury Park is the uncertainty of its cause. Some hesitate to call it a revolt, uprising, or riot to begin with, because unlike the major riots, it had no obvious social or political undertones.

This might make Asbury something of a special case... The riots that broke out in U.S. cities in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, have an easily identifiable cause. So does the Newark riot of 1967, where the police beating of a black cab driver triggered the protest and riot. But in Asbury Park there was no trouble after Dr. King's murder, nor was there any trigger or last straw—such as a provocative instance of police brutality—that brought on the disorder.⁸

The unrest in Asbury Park was initiated by some unruly teenagers following a Fourth of July celebration. It all started on Springwood Avenue a little after midnight when a group of Black teenagers started throwing rocks and bottles at passing cars. Daniel Weeks interviewed my cousin, longtime city resident, Gilbert Reed, who said that incidents such as this “were not uncommon. A similar incident had occurred at a youth basketball league game in the neighboring town of Neptune just a week earlier, but in that instance the police easily dispersed the crowd.”⁹ The comments in the article made by Gilbert were interesting, when considering my cousin went on to become an Asbury Park Police Officer. However, what happened on Springwood Avenue took a turn for the

⁸ Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt,” “”80.

⁹ Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt,” 80.

worse when one of the bottles hit a car stopped at a traffic light. It is unknown if the car was struck by mistake or on purpose, but this was no longer considered playful banter. Soon they started throwing rocks at other passing cars.

I can understand why this was problematic. I grew up two blocks from Springwood Avenue. Therefore, I am aware that Springwood Avenue is one of the direct roads that leads to the beachfront. It is one of the easiest ways to get from the highway to the beach, especially if you want to avoid holiday traffic. Undoubtedly, some of the cars that were being pelted were filled with white tourists. I doubt anyone called the police as long as those boys were throwing rocks at each other. However, once they started targeting tourists, they were affecting business.

Two Black officers responded to the call of disturbance on the Westside of the city along Springwood Avenue. Reverend David Parreott was a pastor and police detective in Asbury Park at the time of the riot and told Daniel Weeks in his interview that the westside of city was only patrolled by Black officers. Parreott and the other African American officers found the assignment demeaning. They were not allowed to patrol the beachfront. This is most likely because someone in authority thought it would be best not to have Black officers overseeing white tourists. The police department dealt with its fair share of internal racial discrimination. Black officers were assigned to the westside of town. It was their task to keep their people under control. Police officers, however, were not viewed favorably in the westside's Black community. It did not matter if the officer was Black or white, they were unwelcomed. The arrival of the two officers made the crowd that had gathered even more unruly. The officers called for backup as things escalated and got out of control, yet backup never came. There is also some

speculation as to why that happened. In 1970, there were only twelve Black officers on the forty-eight-man department, and white officers did not respond to calls on the westside. It was an unwritten rule, that the side of town was outside of their jurisdiction. Basically, the unruly Blacks were not their responsibility. So, no one responded to the distress call of the two Black officers, and it is still unclear if there were any other Black officers on duty that night. Yet, some would argue that point should have been irrelevant. There were officers in trouble and the white officers still should have taken action to help fellow officers.

What ensued was four days of chaos, looting, and a city of fire. If you asked a few eyewitnesses what caused the series of events that took place between July 4th and July 8th, you are likely to get several different answers. Many news outlets reported that it was the wild and disorderly behavior of the Black residents in the city that caused the riots. Black police officers that served on the force in 1970 may tell you that there was racial segregation within the department. The problem within the department was the reason things got out of control. If the white officers had just stepped in to help, the riot could have been avoided. Yet residents who lived on the westside gave a different account. They attested to the fact that it was only a matter of time before something like this happened.

Members from the African American Community were not shy about sharing the stories of police brutality and abuse they experienced at the hands on the Asbury Park Police on a regular basis. Reverend Verner R. Matthews “attributed the trouble to the general conditions on the West Side, a neighborhood the New York Times would later call a ‘ghetto.’ ‘When people see the conditions of the streets—bottles, dope addicts, and

vagrants—they do not want to do business with the shops bordering on this mess,’ Matthews told the Press. He accused town officials of neglecting the Black community. ‘The political leaders are only interested in the main source of revenue for the city—the Boardwalk.’”¹⁰ What is most interesting about Reverend Mathews comments, is that it is fifty-two years later, and the Black community is still neglected, and the boardwalk remains the primary concern of local elected officials.

Post-Riot Living

After a good portion of the city had been burned to the ground, including many businesses, residents were left in the rubble. I grew up amongst the rubble. The beach was no longer the resort area it once was, filled with tourists. For a few years during my childhood the local amusement park called “The Palace” stayed open. The paint on the purslane horses on the merry-go-round eventually faded and doors for the palace closed, but the poor, working-class, mostly Black residents remained. Tourists would visit Asbury Park less and less, but the residents kept the city going. We would still patronize the few small businesses left on the beachfront. There was only one place in town to get good salt-water taffy—a candy shop on Ocean Avenue. The candy shop had abandoned buildings on both sides, but the candy apples and truffles were second to none. Those shops struggled but survived mostly from the business of locals. There were only a few tourists, even in the summer months, that mostly came to relish in nostalgia more than the ocean.

¹⁰ Weeks, “From Riot to Revolt,” 80.

Soon Asbury Park became a resort for residents only. I quite enjoyed growing up there. It was as if we had our own private beach. As a child I did not understand the downturn that had taken place. I could not reminisce about the days of old, because I was not there. I knew my hometown as it was when I arrived. It was a small Black beach town. It had its share of crime, but that was not anything I was disconcerted about. I felt safe when I walked the streets. I had no knowledge of how outsiders, investors, developers, politicians, and urban planners viewed the city. For me it was home, but for others it was a prospect or case study. What they viewed as a dilapidated city was simply home to me.

A Changing City

I remember the city really starting to change after I went off to college. I went off to undergraduate school in Delaware in 1998. I went to college a little over two hours away from Asbury Park, so I came home on every break. I distinctively remember that every time I came home there was a new building going up or a new restaurant in town. In fact, the city started to look so different that one time I can recall passing Ridge Avenue by mistake. I lived on that block all my life but the new contemporary looking buildings on the corner made it unrecognizable. The city was changing, and seemingly for the better.¹¹ New businesses would mean more jobs and the revitalization of the beachfront would bring back more tourists and create a booming local economy. Although I wanted to move to North Jersey to be closer to New York City after

¹¹ Molly Vollman Makris, and Mary Gatta, *Gentrification down the Shore* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 129.

graduation, I considered moving home. Initially, I wanted to move home to teach at the elementary school I attended, to give back to the community that had given so much to me. Yet, I was taken aback when I learned that the cost of living was changing. My parents, grandparents, and other family members who lived in town had homes that were nearly paid off. Although property taxes were on the rise, they were able to manage. This was not the case for many of the longtime residents in the city. They were literally priced out.¹²

Soon the political winds started to blow in a new direction. People were running for office that were relatively new to the city. Prior to the 2000s, most of the candidates in local elections were old-timers. They had campaign slogans like “From the City for the City.” Now, there were unfamiliar faces on the billboards and names on the ballots. They all promised the same thing. They were going to bring Asbury Park back to its glory days. While I was in college I still voted back home by absentee ballot. When I graduated and moved back to the city for a few years, I looked forward to voting in-person again and learning the political landscape. One night I attended a candidates’ forum at the VFW for those running for city council. I was surprised to see mostly white faces on the stage but that did not matter to me too much. I just wanted to hear their platforms and experience so I could be an educated voter and exercise my civic duty. A lot of them said the same thing. The city was going in a good direction, and they had the ability to take it to the next level. Then a candidate gave an answer to a simple question, and I found myself dumbfounded by his answer. The candidates were asked how long they had lived

¹² Alicia Raia-Hawrylak, “The Future of Asbury Park: Gentrification and Youth in a Coastal Community,” *Metropolitics*, March 31, 2015, <https://metropolitiques.eu/The-Future-of-Asbury-Park-Gentrification-and-Youth-in-a-Coastal-Community>.

in the city. Everyone said how many years they had lived in Asbury Park and some shared how they came to live there. One candidate said, “I moved to this place when it was a ghost town.” I was immediately offended and remember saying under my breath “what the hell.” When was my hometown ever a ghost town? Is that what people thought about my city? How could it have been a ghost town when people had always lived here, worked here, and attended school here?

The one statement made by the candidate that night gave me insight into the perspective others had about neighborhoods like mine.¹³ If we were viewed as a ghost town, how could we possibly matter to investors, developers, and politicians? Ghosts are negligible and, worse, nonexistent. The statement meant that those coming to develop did not see much value in the residents who had weathered the storm after the riots. Perhaps to them we were a liability; we certainly were not an asset. We were expendable, replaceable, and it became evident that night that whatever direction the city was going in, it did not include us, just as the direction Manhattan was going in did not include Seneca Village.

Conclusion

Helping communities to unify rather than gentrify is not going to be an easy task, but it is worth a try. For far too long, poor people have been the targets of government-sponsored segregation. Poor people are constantly driven out of communities. They become the collateral damage of redevelopment. The consequences of segregating the poor have been shown to be insurmountable, and, in one way or another, affect us all.

¹³ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018), 7.

“Segregation and isolation into poverty also equates with separation from strong schools, safe or healthy environments, and economic opportunity.”¹⁴ All communities would be safer if the poor were fairly treated and cared for. The nation’s failed education system would start to improve. Redirecting gentrification is a win-win situation for us all.

Studying the history of Asbury Park, New Jersey and Schenectady, New York through the lens of Urban Studies helped this project immensely. It helped to view this subject from the vantage point of the developers and residents. Urban Studies provided an essential theoretical framework for this project because it examines the subject from both sides. Up until this point, I have only been able to see it from one side. I have only seen gentrification as hurtful, oppressive, and intrusive. I took issue with it. When I was appointed the pastor of Duryee Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in Schenectady, New York, it did not take long for me to realize that the same things that had occurred in Asbury Park were starting there. The difference between the two cities is that Asbury Park has been fully gentrified, whereas Schenectady seems to be in its infancy stages. Having lived through gentrification and now witnessing it happen again has brought me to the question “Where will the poor people go?” As a pastor, I must be concerned about this. My members can end up being the collateral damage of the city’s redevelopment plan. I believe there will be some interesting findings at the crossroads where Liberation Theology and Urban Studies meet. It is my hope that when these two disciplines engage, a new framework can be developed; one that will teach us how to live together and finally stop pushing poor people around.

¹⁴ Dolores Acevedo-Garcia et al., “The Child Opportunity Index: Improving Collaboration between Community Development and Public Health,” *Health Affairs (Project Hope)* 33, no. 11 (November 2014): 1952.

As mentioned before, this will be no easy task. “Today’s patterns of segregation and opportunity isolation are not a natural phenomenon or free market urban development. Many layers of pro-segregation policies and practices saturated the development of the twentieth-century American metropolis.”¹⁵ Gentrification is happening by design. A change in basic assumptions needs to occur that teaches us how to live together across lines of class. How do we redirect the policy changes put in place by Roosevelt’s housing act? Local housing policies have tried to address discrimination yet, “despite these improvements, residential segregation remains extremely high in many areas of the country, most notably the Northeast and industrial Midwest.”¹⁶ We must pray and work toward policy changes that will enhance our communities, while protecting the most vulnerable.

There are components of gentrification that imply that we are reiterating the errors of our past. I am proposing that if we analyze the teachings from Deuteronomy, mainly the lessons on how to treat the poor, we can redress gentrification. We can unify our communities and finally learn to live together. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the voices of prophets, past and present, are attempting to explain to us how to live together in harmony and love each other. This message is best modeled in how we care for the poor.

The biblical foundation of this project can be found in Deuteronomy 15. Chapter 15 offers teachings about fairness and inclusivity. These teachings show us how to honor God by how we treat others, specifically the most marginalized. The laws of the Bible

¹⁵ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2017), 236.

¹⁶ Jason Reece, “Confronting the Legacy of ‘Separate but Equal’: Can the History of Race, Real Estate, and Discrimination Engage and Inform Contemporary Policy?” *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021): 112, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2021.7.1.07>.

require that we be empathetic and unselfish. If we can learn to practice fundamental generosity as taught in the Bible, it can lead to equity. If we could understand the idea of unity from the gospel perspective, we can be an illustration of God's love and wisdom to this present age.

One of the purposes of this chapter is to join Urban Studies and biblical principles to address the current problems gentrification creates for low-income and the working poor. Gentrification is occurring all over the country, and frequently in Black and Brown communities. Black and Brown homeowners are being offered below-property-value prices for the homes they worked so hard for. They are being pushed out to make room for newer residents that better fit the new direction of the community.¹⁷ As we studied Seneca Village, Canaan, Liberation Theology, and the history of urban cities, we may determine that we are reliving the nation's worst atrocities. Violence committed against the nation's most defenseless residents is in cities everywhere. I hope we can learn from the research in this doctoral project. I believe together we can solve the problems presented in this study. Yet, certain steps are essential for that to happen. Foremost, we must breakdown biblical principles. Secondly, we must study American history with new lenses, and search deeply for the truths that have been buried.

Before we can birth a new paradigm, we can consider this study on poverty within the context of theology. This will bring our attention to what the Bible says about poverty, as the scriptures are precise in that the poor are to be cared for. Deuteronomy 15:10 says, "Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of

¹⁷ Alison Hope Alkon, Yuki Kato, and Joshua Sbicca. *A Recipe for Gentrification Food, Power, and Resistance in the City* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020), 25.

this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.”

We must show generosity to those that lack food, money, and housing, and that can be done in many ways. The Bible links the poor directly to the Lord. It says in Proverbs 19:17 that a person that lends to the poor, lends to the Lord. This offers us an opportunity to minister through generosity. The working poor should no longer be pushed around or displaced so that others can invest and make money.¹⁸

Lower-income, middle-class, and wealthy families can coexist more cohesively if taught how and given the opportunity to do so, if the government can stop working so hard to separate us. The media also needs to do a better job dismantling fear and not promoting it. Sometimes we do not want to live amongst each other because we fear each other. The overall objective of this project is to teach us to live together.

The non-church related field I have chosen to learn is Urban Studies. I hope this chapter has clearly described why I made that choice. This interdisciplinary theory engages with my study in the book of Deuteronomy and Liberation Theology, informing how we can go about freeing poor people from oppressive housing discrimination.

It is an advantage to my research that Schenectady and Asbury Park are small cites. Asbury Park slipped under the radar when the riots of the 1970s were initially studied. Yet, what happened in this small beach town from July 4 to July 8, 1970 is significant, especially when it comes to this project. Asbury Park is a prime example of gentrification; in fact, a book was published in 2020 titled *Gentrification Down the*

¹⁸ John Harwood, “The Problem with Gentrification,” *CNBC*, accessed February 6, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2019/07/03/the-problem-with-gentrification.html>.

Shore. The book was written by Molly Vollman Makris and Mary Gatta, scholars from Rutgers University. The book is all about the history and gentrification of Asbury Park. Members of my church should not be priced out of Schenectady. For many of them, it is the only home they have known. They are watching as rent is skyrocketing and asking questions like, “pastor what should I do, my landlord just raised my rent again?”

Presently, a satisfactory answer cannot be provided. We do not want to see them leave the community and this is not because it would affect our membership rolls. I do not have to see them pushed out because it is not fair, and they do not deserve that. I pastor a church of hard-working people, some of whom are retirees on a fixed income. For my members who are not homeowners, even if they were asked to leave by their landlord or evicted, where would they go? Could I suggest that they move to the next town over in Rotterdam where the rent is a little more affordable? Who is to say that Rotterdam will not be the next town to be “redeveloped?” Then they will find themselves displaced again.

I question if I will have any success in rallying the churches to fight against housing discrimination. Many pastors tend to want to stay in right relationship with elected officials. Fighting for fair housing policies seems like the right thing to do on the surface, but the political undercurrents can be vicious.¹⁹ We as faith leaders must be more concerned with being in right relationship with God more than the government. We must work hand and hand with elected officers to serve the community, but ultimately, we answer to God not the governor.

¹⁹ Lance Freeman, *There Goes the Hood* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 158.

A look at gentrification through the lens of faith, will be eye-opening for those who have never considered Canaan a gentrification case study. Backed by the data found in Urban Studies and undergirded by the vigor of Liberation Theology, this doctoral project may ignite a Holy Ghost within us to bring change.²⁰ Together we can redirect gentrification towards unification for a better tomorrow, and finally stop pushing poor people from place to place. In all faith and traditions, God has made it clear that we are to care for the poor. Food pantries and clothing giveaways are a part of the work, but so is this. Gentrification is calling us to the frontlines. Pastors, clergywomen and clergymen, faith leaders of all ranks and files—God is calling us to preach to the poor. God is calling us to protect their rights.

²⁰ David Ley, and R. Bruce Martin. “Gentrification as Secularization: The Status of Religious Belief in the Post-Industrial City.” *Social Compass* 40, no. 2 (1993): 217–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776893040002005>.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The displacement of low-income residents that happens because of gentrification is an ongoing problem. The intent of this project was to find solutions to that dilemma using a theological approach. The project design intentionally includes faith-based leadership. Churches, Black Churches especially, are gravely impacted when members are displaced because the community is no longer affordable for parishioners. Pastors of these churches cannot afford to sit back and watch gentrification happen around their church or their church may perish.

There are many issues surrounding gentrification that I could have focused on. There is much research to be done on the effects gentrification has on the local education system. If more affluent residents are moving into the community, why is it that the quality of education rarely improves? Are these new residents sending their children to the public school or opting to enroll them into private institutions they are fortunate enough to be able to afford? I could have addressed the shift in the economy in gentrified cities. On the one hand, everything looks to be on the up-swing as new businesses flock into the area. Yet, we should ask the question, do these businesses cater to the needs of the long-time residents; do they embrace the existing culture in the community? This

project could have taken many directions, yet the displacement of poor people seemed most appropriate.

Several scriptures teach that we should protect the poor. Isaiah 1:17 says, “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” Also, Proverbs 14:31 states, “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” There are so many theological teachings that confirm that faith-based leaders should be at the forefront in this fight. We need to stand up and demand that the displacement of poor people stop and teach people to truly live together.

Displacing low-income residents is a form of discrimination. It is the prejudicial treatment of those who cannot afford to keep up with the added cost of living in their neighborhood. Prejudice that is not centered around gender, race, sexuality, or religion is mainly a form of povertyism or aporophobia. When poor people are the victims of prejudicial treatment, who is to blame? The wealthy, who often fail to understand their role in displacing the poor, or the systems that fail to protect the most vulnerable in a community? Nevertheless, the project is not looking to blame. Inversely, this project would rather bring all parties together to devise a plan to redirect gentrification towards unification.

Methodology

This project is centered around conversations that lead to solutions. Since no community is identical to another, it was necessary to talk to residents, elected officials, and developers about the issues plaguing each city. The two cities I chose to study, Asbury Park, New Jersey and Schenectady, New York, deserved individualized attention.

Both areas are relatively small cities compared to larger cities that have received more attention regarding gentrification. The solutions attempted in cities like San Francisco, Boston, New Orleans, or Brooklyn may not be suitable for the cities I researched. Nonetheless, studies on all these cities serve as useful resources.

I decided to utilize three research tools: surveys, interviews, and group sessions. I chose these methods because it allowed people to share in three different formats. Everyone is not comfortable talking in group sessions. Some people would rather just share their thoughts in a survey without the glare of someone who disagrees with them. Others open up more in one-on-one interviews without interruptions. Surveys were completed first, followed by interviews, and then community meetings. Using these methods proved to be effective. At the end of each survey, two questions were presented. The first question was, “would you be interested in participating in a short interview following this survey?” To this question, 30% answered no. The next question was, “would you be interested in attending a meeting to discuss ways to prevent displacement that happens as a result of gentrification?” Only 52% of the survey respondents answered yes, they would be interested in attending the meeting.

I was surprised at how quickly the surveys were completed. I collected thirty surveys from each city. The link for the survey was posted on social media and emails were sent to residents from both communities. I intended to keep the survey up for two weeks, but they were completed in seven days. The questions on the survey will be shared in the implementation portion of this chapter.

Following the surveys, four interviews were conducted with two stakeholders from each city. The interviewees were able to offer different perspectives and valuable

input. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded. I decided to share the discussions from those interviews verbatim. The conversations were insightful, and I believe sharing the full exchange is beneficial to the research. The community meetings were well attended. Pastors, developers, local elected officials, and survey participants were invited. Local elected officials and pastors were present. Unfortunately, we did not have any developers or representatives from those companies in attendance. The meetings were no longer than two hours and a meal was provided.

Implementation

Sixty surveys were completed in seven days using Survey Monkey, a leading online survey software platform. There were thirty participants from Schenectady and thirty participants from Asbury Park. Graph and data from the survey will be shared further along in this chapter. Here are the questions posed on that survey.

Figure 1: Survey for “A Look at Gentrification through the Lens of Faith”

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Other
- I chose not to answer.

2. What city do you live in?

- Asbury Park, New Jersey
- Schenectady, New York

3. What is your ethnic origin?

- Black or African American
- White
- Latino
- Indian or Alaska Native Asian/ Pacific Islander
- Other

4. What type of neighborhood were you raised in?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Suburban
- ☐ Rural
- ☐ Other

5. Do you know what gentrification is?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

6. Are you familiar with any occurrences of gentrification?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I do not know.

7. How would you summarize the impacts gentrification has on an area?

- ☐ Very Positive
- ☐ Positive
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Negative
- ☐ Very Negative

8. Do you believe that gentrification is an inevitable step in the process of urban revitalization?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I do not know.

9. Have you previously lived, or do you currently live in a gentrified area?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say.

10. If you answered yes to the previous question, please share the name of the city/town & state.**11. How would you identify your socio-economic class?**

- ☐ Upper
- ☐ Upper-Middle
- ☐ Middle
- ☐ Working
- ☐ Low-Income

12. Please provide your email address. THIS INFORMATION WILL NOT BE SHARED.

13. Would you be interested in participating in a short interview following this survey?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. Would you be interested in attending a meeting to discuss ways to prevent displacement that happens as a result of gentrification?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure, please email me more information.

15. By typing your name below, you are giving consent for this information to be used for research purposes only and understand that none of your personal information will be shared, including your name.

Interviews

I had the opportunity to interview four people, two from each city. I interviewed two elected officials, one pastor, and a director from a non-profit development corporation. Names of the participants will not be disclosed. In the next section, before each interview readers will find a little information on each interviewee. Following that brief description of the participant, readers will find the transcribed interview.

Figure 2: Interview #1

Participant number one is a newly elected school board member. He has been serving on the Asbury Park Board of Education for less than a year. He has been an activist in the community for close to a decade. He is also one of the founders of the Asbury Park Affordable Housing Coalition.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: My first question is what is your role in the community? Elected official, long-time resident, etc.?

Interviewee: Multiple now that I am an elected official for the school board and I am an activist, dealing with the Asbury Park Affordable Housing Coalition and I wouldn't consider myself a longtime resident. I have been in Asbury Park since 2015.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: In what ways has the community changed during the time that you have been a resident?

Interviewee: Well, I have seen gentrification on steroids, where the African American community was actually pushed out of Asbury Park. And it has been on this hyper gentrified track since I've been here.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Did you grow up in an economically or culturally diverse community? Tell me a little bit about your hometown.

Interviewee: I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. Basically, I grew up right after the riots. 1967 I was born. So, Newark went through a transition after the riots and cities were being torn apart. There became a structure where minorities actually became the dominant communities in the city, especially Newark. So right now, a lot of what I saw was communities that had an ability to manage, direct and build itself. But most of it was not done because a lot of the elected officials were, one, not educated in the process. Two did not substantially have the economic balance to actually accomplish most of the things they were looking to accomplish. After going on to high school, I went to a private high school, and I saw what the difference was between money and being sustainable, [and what it] really meant to community.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: So, regarding being culturally diverse you said the minorities became the majority.

Interviewee: Yes, minorities became the majority.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: So, economically diverse, would you say yes or no to that?

Interviewee: No. And that is why I said after going into a private Catholic High School, I saw people that were from other communities. They had a strong economic base that gave them leverage to not only do the things that they did from an educational standpoint; they had the knowledge and the power to do it. Just because you have the ability to have the majority, does not mean that you have the economic ability to control what goes on?

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Right, so money is power.

Interviewee: Yes.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: You answered this already, but I'm still going to ask again. Do you feel the community has undergone or is currently undergoing gentrification? Yes or No, and why do you feel that way?

Interviewee: Yes, and on steroids. One of the things that was said to me, which I said many years ago, was that Asbury Park is a beach town. And as I've known from traveling the country, any town that had access to water, which was a benefit to the community, was never in distress, of really being economically devastated. But Asbury Park had kept that scenario going, that they were. Come to find out that the people who were in charge were fighting. The people who had the capital, who had the money were fighting among themselves. This kept the community down, which kept the majority of the minorities in the community devastated. So, you had a majority of minorities that had voting power, but they did not have economic power. And those with economic power kept the city in distress, and this is from research. This is not anecdotal. These were things if you look into the court records, I have read documents, it actually explains it. There were many times that the state wanted to step in and help the city out and the city refused the help of the state. This was to keep them economically viable, which would have helped a community that was devastated.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you, next question. Do you think anything can be done to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from Asbury Park and if so, what can be done?

Interviewee: Well, we are using legal strategies. There are some things going on right now. I cannot fully disclose. But we had a situation, and the Boston Way Projects were a perfect example. As you know, people were told that in that low-income project, that they had to be repaired, they had to be restructured. So, they were given section eight vouchers and told to leave and told they could later return. Right now, we have a similar situation with the Lincoln Village Apartments. However, presently we are at a point where we may have an agreement that will prevent people from being pushed out. We can find alternate ways of keeping them here and build that community back. So, one of the things is legal, and having the ability to create a system. Those who cannot fight for themselves we have a legal group that will come in and fight for them.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you.

Interviewee: Oh, let me actually add on. One of the other things we can do is community organizing. We went in, and we pushed the city to put in an inclusionary zoning ordinance that allowed affordable housing to be built. And we also did something that

most cities have not done, we put in rent control that had to be maintained in certain buildings. Their rents cannot escalate and [push] people out. So, these are the community pieces that you can have.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: So, you guys have established rent control?

Interviewee: We have established rent control, not the one I wanted, but we got some type of rent control.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, is there anything else that you want to add or say in this interview?

Interviewee: Right now, there are many avenues to stop gentrification and make communities inclusive and have equity in communities and it does not have to be taxing to people. It is about reallocating funds so that people who have not benefited for years because of racial discrimination can now benefit in the communities where they were born and raised.

Figure 3: Interview #2

I interviewed one of the newer council members from the city of Schenectady. Prior to being elected he was already a strong voice in the community as an organizer. He also works for the local school district and is a lifelong resident.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: What is your role in the community, are you a pastor, elected official, longtime resident, etc.?

Interviewee: Yes. So, I am an elected official and I consider myself a community leader as well.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: How long have you lived in Schenectady?

Interviewee: My entire life. So, forty-two years.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: So, you are a lifelong resident. In just a few words, three sentences or less, how did your family come to live in this community?

Interviewee: So, I believe my family came here when my father got a job in Albany, in the Albany area and I think that is why they relocated here. And I had an aunt that was living here at the time going to school at University of Albany. So, I think that is how my family got here.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Do you know offhand what the job was?

Interviewee: I want to say he was working at a community center. Yeah, I think that is what it was. I knew at one time he was doing that. I am not sure if that was the job that brought him here though.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Wow, my father ran a community center. Okay, did you consider Schenectady a safe neighborhood when you were growing up? This is a multiple choice. So, you your choices are Yes, somewhat safe for the residents but not for visitors, or not safe at all.

Interviewee: I would say Yes. Somewhat.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay. Did you graduate from the local high school? And if so, what year?

Interviewee: So actually, I ended up dropping out of school. And then I went back to school and yes, I graduated in 1999 from Schenectady High School. So yes, I left school for a minute, and had to go back because I was a naughty boy.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Yeah, I get it. I did not really get good at school until I got into graduate school. Okay, so in what ways has the community changed in the last ten to fifteen years?

Interviewee: So, communities change in a couple of different ways. I think that there is, I don't know if this is like nostalgia or what, I felt like growing up there was more of a close-knit community feel. I do not know if I experienced that the same way. I think like I think about my childhood, like, you know, riding bikes and around the neighborhood and you know, getting to know kids and you know, their parents, knowing my parents. I do not think that my kids had that same experience. And I know that, you know, so that's kind of one way it's changed. Another way I would say that might be relevant, like I remember might be a little bit before my time actually. But like, like the Mount Pleasant neighborhood was heavily populated by Italian people. And it was a lot of small businesses owned or operated by Italian people. And that was actually viewed as one of the quote unquote nicer areas of Schenectady. As you know, kind of that whole piece when you are going down from Mount Pleasant to Broadway that piece of Bellevue do to GE. So, like, you know, I recall people referring to that as one of the nicer parts of Schenectady, if you will, one of the more affluent parts.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Gotcha, okay next question. Did you grow up in an economically and culturally diverse community?

Interviewee: Yeah, I would say so. Um, so I [am] kind of unique in the way that, like, I can almost pinpoint times where my parents were doing better, like I was old enough to remember, like when we moved into a house, in the Woodlawn neighborhood, before that. We were living in apartments and renting, and I can kind of remember different quality of life changes, if you will, I did not have the language for it at the time. But yes, and you know, so I have been, I have been broke, you know. And then I remember us doing a little better. And then I remember my mother losing her job. And I remember that kind of rocked us pretty good. So, we ended up back in a really tough financial situation for a couple of years.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: How about culturally. Like was your school diverse growing up?

Interviewee: Culturally, like it was just the school kind of mix at that time. Yes. So, my school was pretty diverse. At the time, I remember how magnet school was, so it was the first magnet school, or one of the first magnet schools here in Schenectady. And I remember, they were, you know, we used to have like, international themed days where we would like, celebrate different cultures and things like that. And there was, you know, because I got bused to my school, my friends who lived in my neighborhood, they went to Woodlawn. And there was not a lot of racial diversity there. But I had a lot more racial diversity in the school that I attended.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: So, was that school, the one you attended in Schenectady?

Interviewee: Yep.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Do you feel the community has undergone or is currently undergoing gentrification? Yes, or no? Why do you feel that way?

Interviewee: So, I would say yes, um, I think that there are some markers, right. Um, that I do not know enough about it to say like, this is like gentrification, but there's definitely some indicators, right, of gentrification. So, like I was, and I think about how, you know, I hear families who have lived in . . . a good friend of mine mother's example. She lived in the neighborhood for, you know, fifty years. And just, like, maybe three years ago, she ended up losing her apartment. Now, she has been paid for this house, you know,

multiple times and over, in fact, she's living here, but she couldn't really afford it. At one point she just got priced out. And I know that is not a unique situation to her. I've heard that a lot more. It is actually one of the reasons why, you know, decided to get politically involved as well, because I was like, thinking like, you know, how does this happen? And we see what some of the development that is happening in Schenectady people where there is like, now, it seems like there's affordable housing there, developers is grants because they want to build the for affordable housing, but I do not know how affordable their housing actually is. And if you are using that federal formula, you know, that's pretty outdated. And so, I would say yes, people are getting priced out of where they live. And I think that quote, also there is, you know, even with, like influx of business units, and even in the nonprofit sector, you see people who are owning and operating the businesses and decision-making capacities within their agency or whatever, but they don't live necessarily in the community. So, it is almost like they are extracting those funds and going off someplace else, but that type of job that being that it is available in this community impacts the price of housing and things like that. So those are some of the indicators. I will say, there are markers of gentrification.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, I think you answered the next question, which is, is the neighborhood still affordable?

Interviewee: No, not from what I hear.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: I should have put this in here. But I think, um, I think the way that renters experience it versus homeowners is very different. I am getting that vibe from the interviews and surveys I'm doing. Okay. Do you think anything can be done to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from Schenectady? And if so, what can be done?

Interviewee: So yes, I think something can be done. I think that we form a Housing Coalition, I think it is something that we should do. I think that the city, and I am going to be trying to put this forth, I think that we should form a Housing Coalition and do a rent I'm not sure if this is the right time. But um, I do not know if it is a feasibility study or basically a study that looks at exactly what you are talking about. And I think that we can also prioritize developers and investors who are going to come in with more of an equitable lens, that are social justice minded. And I think that we can do that by really

prioritizing them and incentivizing developers to build real affordable housing. And then I think from the city level, what we can do is be a little more creative. You know, I think that there's things that are happening in the city that are good. But I think we could be doing so much more, so more of those things would be like, our homes program, like we can, as a city, leverage some resources to make housing more, not just affordable, [but] more accessible for people who live here. So, you know, I've seen in different variations of different places where people will, like, take someone who saw like, this lady who's been living in this house for forty years, you know, she didn't have the best, you know, credit situation, but the city, the actual city can, you know, look at her rent history. And we can actually report that as a city to say, hey, you know, what, she has been making these, these payments, as long as you know, permission from your landlord. And I think that can help people be in a better position to, you know, become homeowners. And I think that's where we really need to focus on is looking at some of these levitated properties, and not just looking to sell them on for the fast dollar, but look at the long term implications of helping somebody become a homeowner, and what does that do for generational wealth, and as well as maintaining, you know, certain cultural markers in the community?

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, thank you so much. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Interviewee: Sure, I think that this is really important work you are doing and you're dope, and you are amazing. And when you were saying like, this is not going to stop here. I am really happy about that. Because this is something that we need people who are seen in positions of leadership to like, take this issue on that it lends some credibility to it. And people like you stepping into this role will or kind of taking this issue on will welcome other people, and I think it allow people to kind of authorize themselves to say, yes, why aren't we talking about this? And a lot of times when people are talking about this, it is from the lens of, you know, prioritizing property. When I think that, you know, leaders, we need to prioritize people and I think that you are the person you know, you're someone who gets that. So, I think that that is a good space to be in.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. I am definitely taking this seriously and plan to put it in front of as many people as possible.

Figure 4: Interview #3

I had a chance to speak with a local pastor who has served in the community for thirty-four years. She also worked closely with the Community Land Trust. Part of the purpose of the Land Trust was to prevent displacement in the city of Schenectady.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: My first question is, what is your role in the community? Are you a pastor, elected official, longtime resident, etc.?

Interviewee: I am a pastor, but also particularly within the Schenectady community, I am a domestic violence counselor. I have done that for 20 years.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: May I ask, how long have you lived and served in the city?

Interviewee: It has been thirty-four years.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay. In what ways has the community [of] Schenectady changed in the last ten to fifteen years?

Interviewee: Well, from the space where I operate, Patty's place out in the front of the SICM building. In my role at the YW. I have watched in the past two-hundred-thirty-five years, maybe new housing, all day house, old buildings torn down, and new modern apartments put in place that I believe are intended to be mixed use low and moderate income, though I am not quite sure about that. But it is both. What empties onto two Albany Street right in front and Craig Street. Yes. So, there's new apartments on both of those corners as well as further down. And then, of course, what used to be Summit Towers, which was housing for the elderly, I think is now a different kind of housing and is all refurbished. So, lots of changes, or at least the quality of the housing available in that specific location. I mean, in the downtown area, of course, there has been a lot of work too. We have more restaurants, more entertainment spots, you know, that whole kind of thing, which has been, I think, viewed as successful. I've personally as, as when working with, at least in some capacity with the lower income community have not been sure whether that successfulness in that area has benefited people on the Hill, for example, and I find that concerning. Not surprising but concerning. Yes. I do not have any hard data to support that. It is just my sense of things that the poor are still poor, even though some of the wealthier in Schenectady have gotten a little wealthier.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Gotcha. Okay. Thank you. Did you grow up in an economically or culturally diverse community? Can you tell me a little bit about your hometown?

Interviewee: No, I did not. I grew up in Levittown on Long Island, which was a suburb, 99% white people. By the time my parents moved in, this was no longer on the books as law but when it was built, it had very racist policies. Only people of color could not purchase. I do not think Jewish people [could] purchase [in] Levittown in the beginning. I mean, it was very, very restrictive before those things were outlawed. While I was growing up there, there was some Catholics and Jewish people and a few Protestants. So, there was a little bit of, in terms of Judaism, diversity, but really, it was a very white suburb on Long Island.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, do you feel the community of Schenectady has undergone or is currently undergoing gentrification? Yes or no, and why do you feel that way?

Interviewee: I think so, though, I am not certain. I do not know if it is an odd perspective on gentrification, but maybe a puzzled perspective on gentrification. In the early 1990s, I was on the board I worked for. For a while I was very involved with the Community Land Trust of Schenectady, [which was] created to fight gentrification. And when this started to be introduced in Schenectady, it tended to be hard to get it to sort of sell the concept because at that time, in the nineties, when many areas had become gentrified, it did not seem like Schenectady had. And so, while it was a great concept, I do not know how much you know about the concept. People buy the house, there are some government subsidies involved, usually. But they do not own the land, they leased the land. And at its best, the whole community kind of owns the land together as one corporation and makes decisions together. But people own their individual houses. And somehow at the time, in ways that I do not fully understand or remember, I guess it was understood to be a way that people of lower income could regain housing in the neighborhoods where they'd been pushed out of. And, again, it somehow didn't quite catch on in Schenectady, although the organization lasted for about twenty-five years. And now it has been combined into better community neighborhoods.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Yes, I am familiar with it in that way. As a combined organization.

Interviewee: Yes. So, I was intrigued by the idea that here, we tried to do something that would either work against or prevent gentrification or something, and it did not really seem to quite fly. And now gentrification seems to be happening, and how ironic that is. So, I guess my answer is yes, I do think it is happening. Right. And I am counted by how we somehow are unable to, to reduce the likelihood or something.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you. Well, it touched on the last question a little bit, which is, do you think anything can be done to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from Schenectady? And if so, what can be done?

Interviewee: I think some form of providing for them too. . . I mean, I don't think a renewal of the Community Land Trust concept would work either at this point, but [maybe] some kind of legislation that wouldn't let people buy up houses and change them up. Again, when I understood we stand to be called mixed-use housing, or you know, where people of varying socio-economic levels can live in the same space and are encouraged to live in that same space rather than separating by neighborhoods, as so often happens. Does that answer the question fully?

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Yeah, I think it does. Good. Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me regarding this subject?

Interviewee: Well, I'll jump back to that last question and say, some kind of program or gatherings that empower people of lower income and assist them ways to like not something that people with income swooping in to help people without income, but something that helps people take possession of their neighborhood in a way and supports that. And I do not have a concrete idea what that would be exactly, but maybe the reason I do not have that is because the idea hopefully would come from those people themselves, and that those with power might help them make it happen. I do not know if I have anything else.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: No, what you said is good.

Interviewee: I am really interested to hear, you know, when your project's done, to read and see whatever. Yes, I will certainly share that with you tricked by this subject. I mean, I, in fact remember reading about?

Interviewee: Well, I mean, we learned about gentrification when I was in seminary in the eighties. I went to Princeton. So, we did a lot with Trenton. And I remember learning about the gentrification that was beginning to happen in Trenton at that time or had been happening in Trenton. And I do not remember a lot of details about it. But I have been aware of it as a problem for a long time. So, I would love to see it solved.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Yes, me and you both.

Figure 5: Interview #4

I interviewed the Director of Real Estate Development for the largest non-profit developer in Asbury Park, New Jersey. He is not a resident of the city, but is a long-time resident of the Jersey Shore area.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, so now we are recording. Okay, so I am going to start by asking what your role in the community of Asbury Park is. Pastor, like an official long-time resident employee, what is your role?

Interviewee: Well, I am an employee of Interfaith Neighbors. My title is Director of Real Estate Development. And I have been with Interfaith for seventeen years now. In addition to the development of the affordable housing, my primary role over those years, has been to run the West Side Asbury Park neighborhood revitalization Tax Credit Program, which I don't know if you're familiar with, but it's a program run by the Department of Community Affairs, where private corporate investment is brought into the community, and they get tax credits for their investment, in order to. . . I don't want to get too far off in the weeds on that. But, you know, nonprofit organizations submit a plan, which Interfaith did in 2006. And, you know, then you seek investors to carry out aspects of that plan. We have worked with many different organizations on the west side, Boys and Girls Club, community fairs and Resource Center, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and others, to try to implement some of the NRTC programs. And they have covered a wide range of things, in addition to affordable housing. For our affordable housing work, which Interfaith was doing for some years before I came, that has primarily been scattered site, redevelopment of single-family, for-sale housing. And that has been our focus. And over the course of the twenty plus years that Interfaith has been doing that, I think we have developed a total of fifty-four affordable housing units on the west side.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you. In what ways has the community changed in the last ten to fifteen years?

Interviewee: That's a broad question. You know, there has certainly been some growth. And, you know, I think, in some ways, I feel like you must answer that question, you know, looking at Asbury Park, as opposed to just the west side. And, as you know, from having grown up here, the city's former heyday, if you will, was the 1950s and early 1960s. It was still a primary destination for summer visitors. And, as you also know, in July of 1970, there were civil disturbances that destroyed a good bit of Springwood Avenue. And that had a very detrimental effect on Asbury Park. Reputationally as much as anything else that people focused on, and in some ways, the city never recovered from that until the early 2000s. I am going to say, you know, that's just had an impact. I think what sometimes gets lost when people look at that, and they focus only on that event as being the thing that really caused people to go elsewhere when they came to visit the shore in the summer, [is that] I think there were some other factors that played in, [such as] the extension of the parkway. I was born in 1952, and you grew up always thinking a little department has always been there, but you know, like, everything, it was not, and it really didn't extend south of here until the 1950s. So, you know, that gave people the ability to go further south easily to places like Long Beach Island and whatever. That had an impact. The other thing that had an impact, I think, in terms of the sort of commercial impact of the civil disturbances on Asbury Park was the opening of the Monmouth Mall. I mean, that was the first big retail mall and, you know, that took a lot of business away. But when we focus on the west side, the location of those civil disturbances, and where all the impact and the destruction happened, you know, that recovery has been terribly slow. In fact, we are finishing a project now on Springwood, the Parkview AP project, which is a ten-property, residential development, mixed income 30% before doubling the rest of market rate, you know, that's the first new residential construction for home ownership. On Springwood Avenue, since those civil disturbances, it has been a long time coming back now. You know, in terms of other changes, more recent changes [are from] the pandemic. I think that has impacted all aspects of people's lives. But the way it's impacted the west side and Asbury Park and real estate most is that the real estate market has just been very strong, almost overheated. And during the pandemic, with all

the pressure from people wanting to leave New York City and leave the cities in North Jersey, I think there was a lot of pressure with people wanting to find other places to move to. And that has had a tremendous impact on property values here in Asbury Park. For those that own property, [it] has been good, and property values have gone way up. But as an affordable housing developer, we have Interfaith or are looking at what has happened to the cost of a lot on the west side, and what five or six years ago might have been a, just round[ed] numbers, \$40,000 lot, let's say it is now a \$240,000. So, values have gone through the roof, at the same time that the supply of available buildable lots has shrunk. I mean, there were many lots vacant and available that had been acquired from them, by the city through tax foreclosures or other means, over many years. And when we started our affordable housing program, the city had a pretty extensive holding of scattered site lots that were not used; they had been foreclosed, [and] most of the houses have been torn down. So, there were vacant lots unused. And Interfaith worked with the city to redevelop those. [Now], that supply is diminished, there's fewer of them. And you know, that plus the cost of lots has made it much harder moving forward to build affordable housing. You know, I look at it and say, if I have to pay \$240,000 for a lot, and I combine that with a spike, the huge increase that we've seen during the pandemic, and building materials and labor costs, it becomes all but impossible to pay that much for the ground, and then produce a house that you can sell for an affordable price. And that is the challenge that we're looking at going forward. And I cannot sit here right now saying I know what the answer is.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Now, did you grow up in an economically or culturally-diverse community? Can you tell me a little bit about your hometown?

Interviewee: Sure. I was born in Belmar, you know, on seventeen Belvoir. And just before I started kindergarten, my family moved to Matawan. And when I was in seventh grade, we moved to Wall Township. I do not know if you know where the old mill is, but, you know, it is basically the houses behind us. We are in Spring Lake Heights; we were actually Wall Township. So, you know, back to your original question, I grew up in a diverse community. Now, I really cannot say that, though. I would not accurately label any of those communities that have been particularly diverse. You know, some, I am not sure what else to say about that. As I say, I have been working here for seventeen years,

[and] I spent a lot of time in Asbury growing up. I mean, it was a different Asbury Park in those days in the fifties and sixties, which was sort of the big city at the shore, where you want to go shopping. My mom worked at Steinbeck's on Cookman Avenue for over twenty years. In fact, she was still working there when those civil disturbances took place. So, there [has] been a connection to Asbury Park. And one of the things I remember as a kid is we would go to Fishers Department Store on Springwood to do some of our back-to-school shopping. And, you know, having grown up in Belmar and Manasquan, when you came to Springwood, it was like a different world. It was, you know, a lot of activity and, of course, then this was pre-disturbances. It was a vibrant commercial area. There is a lot of activity, and much more urban than the feeling of the places that I grew up in. And I always found that fascinating. But I did not grow up here.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you. Do you feel the community of Asbury Park has undergone or is currently undergoing gentrification? Yes or no, and why?

Interviewee: Well, yes, it's clearly going through some gentrification. That's a term that gets used a lot. Sometimes, I think many people might define it differently. But at least in the sense that there's a lot of activity, a lot of growth, a lot of investments, all of that is, you know, I think it comes under that banner of gentrification. And as I said, in these last couple of years during the pandemic is when we have really seen, you know, the cost of land going up. Some of that's a supply and demand thing, there's fewer lots, [so] they're going to be more valuable. But the growth has been stunning in terms of that valuation. And, you know, I know there's always a concern with gentrification, one that I share. When you're talking about areas or neighborhoods that are economically distressed, how do you improve them? You want to encourage investment to help rebuild them and to improve them. But how do you do that without pushing the people that have been there out? That's really the rub with gentrification. And I am not sure I know the answer. You know, you could get into a long discussion about the politics of it, and how much money is invested in affordable housing. And what are the subsidies? Unfortunately, that's one of those things that is so caught up in politics, in many ways, at the national level, because that's where the bulk of the affordable housing funding comes from, and we've certainly seen as different administrations have been in place, there's more money made available then it gets cut, and then you get some more. But you know, it's a challenging

topic. On the one hand, the investments and rebuilding and, you know, it's "growth." It's an improvement. But it has an impact on those that are here that don't have the financial ability to join in those investments and share in the growth or share in that value growth.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you. I think you have touched on the last question a little bit, which is, do you think anything can be done to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from Asbury Park? And if so, what can be done?

Interviewee: You know, you have only asked a few questions, and boy, they're broad. And I try to be optimistic about things. So, I do not want to say, no, there's nothing that can be done. But I do not know if I have the answer. But what can be done takes a collective will. And it takes the political will to make the investments necessary. The challenge in Asbury Park, and on the west side, again, goes back to what I said before, there's fewer vacant lots where you could build. And, you know, it has always been an issue here in the years I have been here at Asbury, it's when we've talked about affordable housing. I remember there were some times where the debate was couched in terms of what's Asbury affordability, you know? You could say, because I know we were doing some houses when I first started, and we were building single-family houses. This was the early 2000s, 2006, 2008, 2010. And we were building them and selling them for, you know, \$100,000. For a while we were trying to keep our sale price just under one-hundred. Many people in the community say, well, I do not have \$100,000, but you know, there is a certain cost to build that no matter how efficiently you do it. And frankly, I think Interfaith [has] been able to do it pretty efficiently. We have had a good group of subcontractors who have worked for us and with us for a long time. I think they have tried to keep their costs down. Part of it is we've always been good about, you know, paying our contractors quickly and I kind of want to say that we've had a certain loyalty with some of our subs, but even with that, you know, what lumber costs, the contractors that come in, they have to charge for what they're doing. It is hard to keep those costs down. And you have to recognize that not everybody, based on their particular economic situation, is going to be able to afford a house. And that is where, you know, that's where you need the help. You know, and there are just many factors that, to me, it is not a simple question at all. And people must step up. And by that, I mean, there's people I have talked to multiple times over the course of many years, and

they are interested in housing, you must put an application, you have to start the process somewhere. And sometimes it is just getting people to take that step so that they don't start with, well, I don't have \$100,000, I don't do that. And that, you know, they do not understand financing, that, to buy a house for \$100,000, just, again, use that term, or use that figure, you don't necessarily have to have \$100,000. But you must have a down payment, which is often the biggest obstacle that I see, for a lot of families that are struggling, you must have good credit, which is, again, a major obstacle, and that has become a bigger thing. Over the years the banking industry has changed. I think you don't have so much the hometown bank, or that you kind of walk down Main Street or, you know, whatever town you're in, and sit down with somebody who lives in the town and makes a loan decision based on you, they get to know you. It's all, you know, based on credit scores. And that is a challenge for people, we see it all the time with families that we help, because as you know, we do things other than build a house; we do rental assistance and help people with their bills. But what I have seen from so many people, is, you know, they're struggling, and then hard-working people, they're working two jobs, three jobs, you have a kid fall down and gets hurt has to go to the emergency room. And he commanded the emergency with a \$2,500 bill for, you know, just pulling that number, but I know I cut my finger once few years ago, put up a Christmas tree, you know, just cut it and had to get stitches, I had to go to the ER, because . . . I don't want to get off on this tangent, but you know, what to do for some stitches, and the bill was \$2,200. Like, you know, it kind of freaked me out. But, you know, fortunately, I was able to pay that and move on. For a lot of families, they can't, and that, you know, stitch or whatever it might be that happens, sets them back for a long time. A car breaks down, and they just don't, you know, it's an expensive bill, those kinds of things, people are struggling. I'm sure you, you know, you understand what I'm talking about there. And with credit scores, you know, you have that kind of setback, and it takes you a long time to recover. So, we see all those factors are in play. And I do not I wish I had, you know, the sort of magic answer that you can snap your finger and say this, here's how we do it. But it is, you know, everybody's situation is different. And those little things, you know, that happened can really impact people who are struggling just to make ends meet. Now, I say that based on the experience, and the years I have been here, what we have seen in recent

years with the pandemic and inflation. Just I mean, go to the grocery store, and you know, we're used to going to the grocery store, and, you know, maybe you spent \$100 to buy your weekly groceries. You go now and it's over to our grocery shopping last week, it's been, you know, \$240 and my wife had been at the grocery store, you know, a week or so before. So, you know, there are lots of factors in play here that are making all of it harder. And I wish I had a magic answer. We have on the positive side, if it is a positive, we've seen some wages go up. And that is helpful. But, you know, you listen to the economists and a major factor that they are pointing to in the inflation that we're seeing now is wage growth. So, it is, you know, that, you know, I don't have an easy answer to this. Okay, thank you.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Okay, well, those were all my questions. Thank you for your time today and everything you have shared. Is there anything else you want to let me know before I stop the recording and everything?

Interviewee: I think I have covered all that I can think of okay, you know, you have my contact information, I believe so feel free to reach out to me anytime. If you have any particular questions or exchange. I will be more than happy to talk to you again. Anytime.

Rev. Harris Jean-Simon: Thank you.

Interviewee: Thank you. Good luck with your research and your ministry.

Community Meetings

The community meetings were held at two Historical Black Methodist Churches. I chose to hold the meetings there because of the adverse effects of gentrification that impact the Black Church. Additionally, it was important to have the meetings at a location that would signify the involvement of the faith-based community. The first meeting was held at Saint Stephen A.M.E Zion Church in Asbury Park. The second meeting was held at the church that I presently pastor, Duryee Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in Schenectady. Members from the churches attended, as well as members from

the community. I also placed a faith-based leader in each of the groups when we had small group activities.

Figure 6: Participant Demographics

Asbury Park

- 2 Elected Official
- 4 Faith-Based Leaders
- 12 Residents (including community organizers)

Schenectady

- 3 Faith-Based Leaders
- 14 Residents (including community organizers)

At the beginning of each meeting, I acknowledged that we had people in attendance from different faith and cultural communities. It was an interfaith gathering. There were also agnostics in attendance. After explaining that the invitations were purposely extended to a diverse audience, I further explained that I valued their input and presence. I also explained that I would be reading from the book of Deuteronomy. After reading Deuteronomy 15:1–11 and explaining its significance for our work, I opened with prayer and our conversations begun.

Figure 7: Questions from Small Group Discussion

1. Do you think anything can be done to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from Asbury Park/ Schenectady and if so, what can be done?
2. What action can we come up with to prevent the displacement of low-income residents?
3. What do we want the role of faith-based leaders to be regarding this action?
4. How will we present this idea to the community at large and how do we want it implemented?

Table 1: Responses According to Gender

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Male	30.00%	18
Female	68.33%	41
Non-Binary	1.67%	1
Other	0.00%	0
I choose not to answer	0.00%	0
TOTAL		60

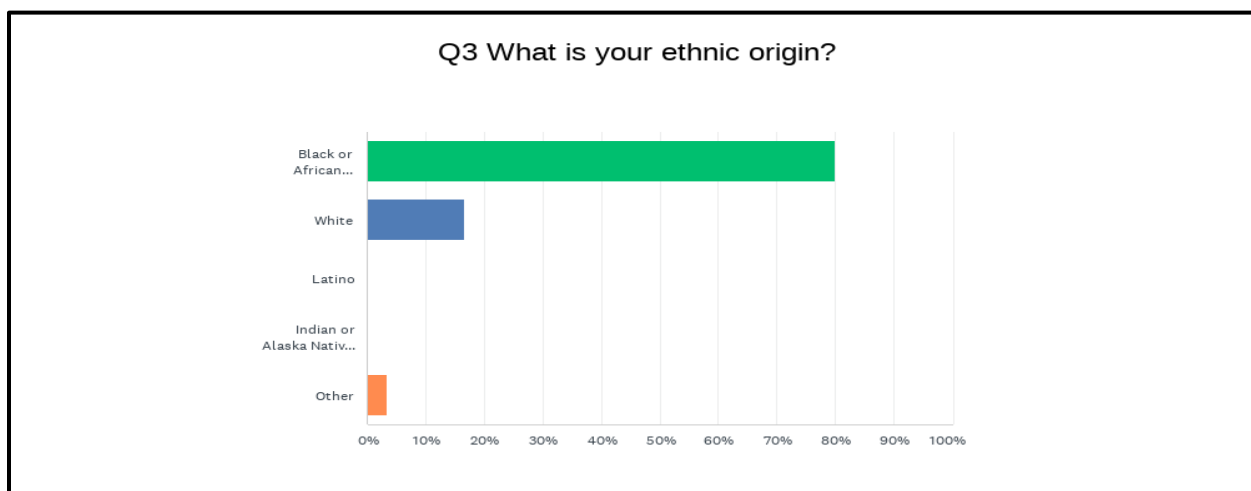
Each group was asked to collectively come up with ideas and actions we could do to help prevent displacement. They were also asked to consider the teaching on Deuteronomy 15: 1–11.

Summary of Learning

As seen in Table 2, most of the survey participants were Black or African American. This aligns with a study conducted in 2020 at Stanford: “A Stanford sociologist has determined that the negative effects of gentrification are felt disproportionately by minority communities, whose residents have fewer options of neighborhoods they can move to compared to their white counterparts.”¹ In both Asbury Park and Schenectady, it is indeed the Black and Brown communities that are most susceptible to displacement.

¹ Sandra Feder, “Gentrification Disproportionately Affects Minorities,” *Stanford News* (Stanford, CT) December 1, 2020, <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/12/01/gentrification-disproportionately-affects-minorities/>.

Table 2: Responses According to Ethnicity



As Table 3 displays, most of the participants were raised in urban communities. The National Community Reinvestment Coalition reports, “almost a quarter (24 percent) of all urban areas, or CBSAs, saw at least one tract gentrify between 2000 and 2013.”² Therefore, the likelihood that the participants had observed or experienced gentrification firsthand was fairly high.

² Jason Richardson, Bruce, Mitchell, and Juan Franco, “Shifting Neighborhoods: Gentrification and Cultural Displacement in American Cities – NCRC,” National Community Reinvestment Coalition, March 19, 2019, accessed December 31, 2023, <https://ncrc.org/gentrification/#:~:text=While%20gentrification%20impacted%20a%20minority>.

Table 3: Responses According to Neighborhood Type

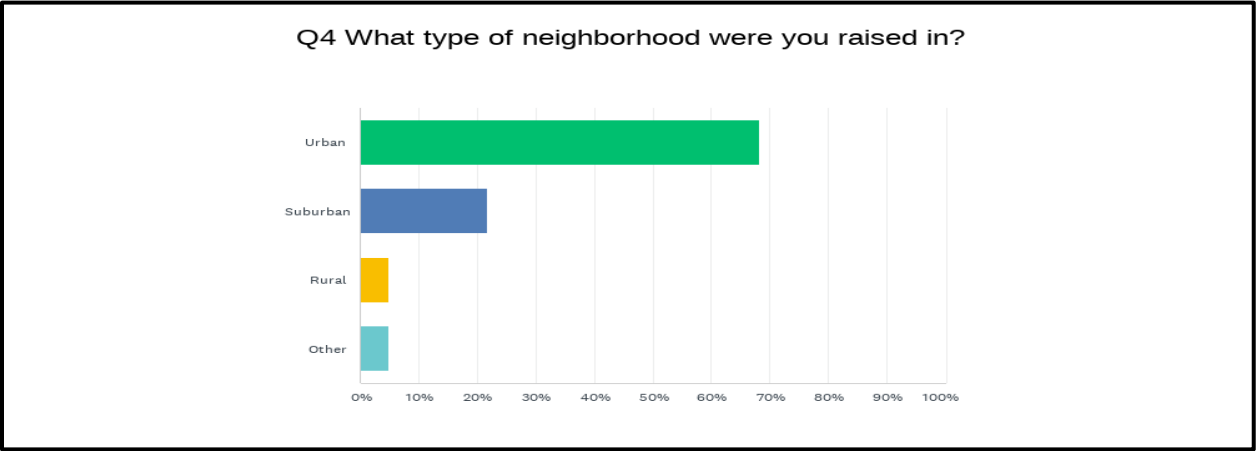
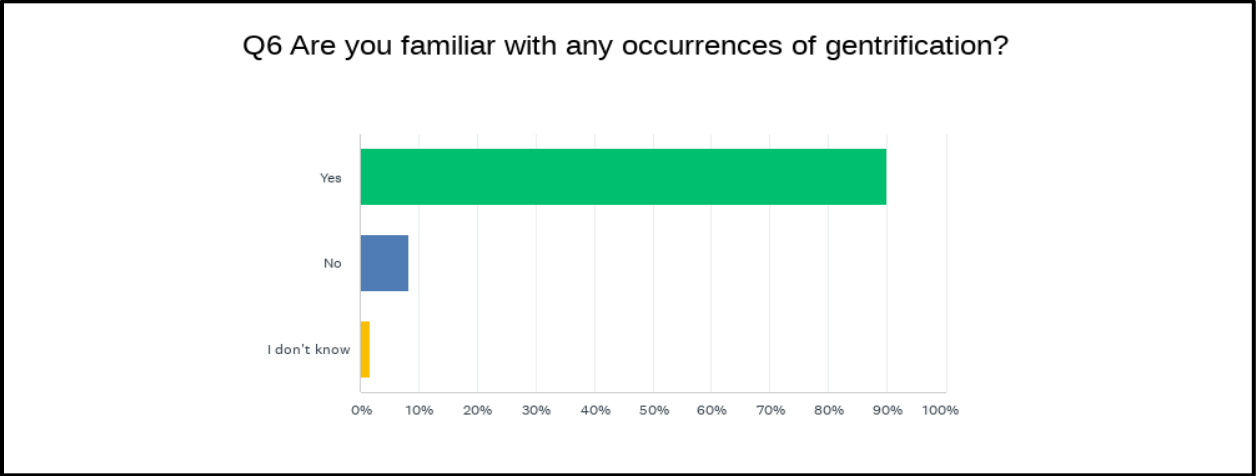


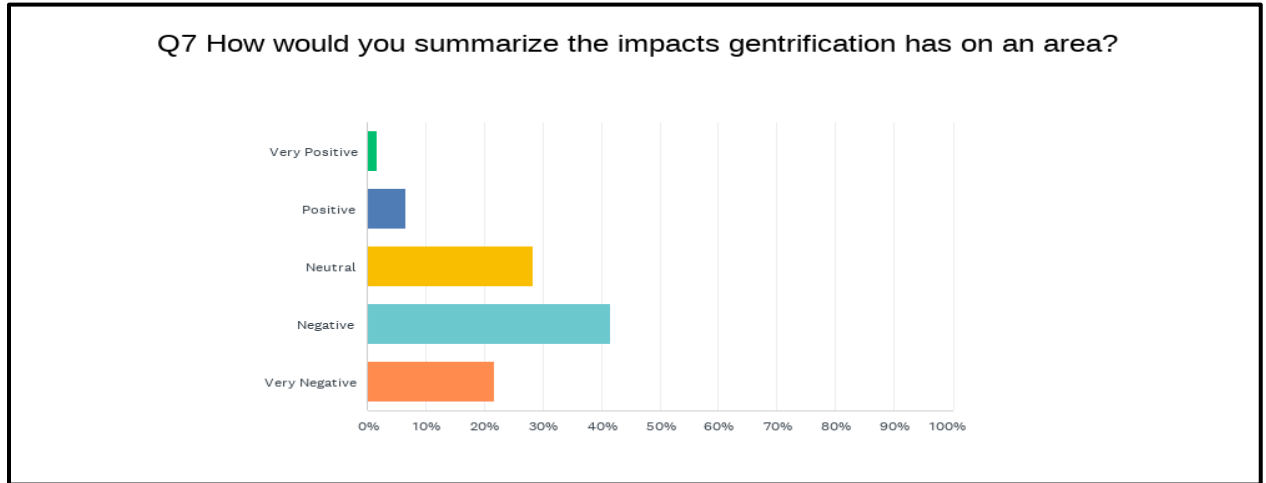
Table 4 shows that when asked if they were familiar with occurrences of gentrification, most of the survey participants reported being familiar with them. Gentrification is happening increasingly across the country, making this research so vital.

Table 4: Responses According to Familiarity with Gentrification



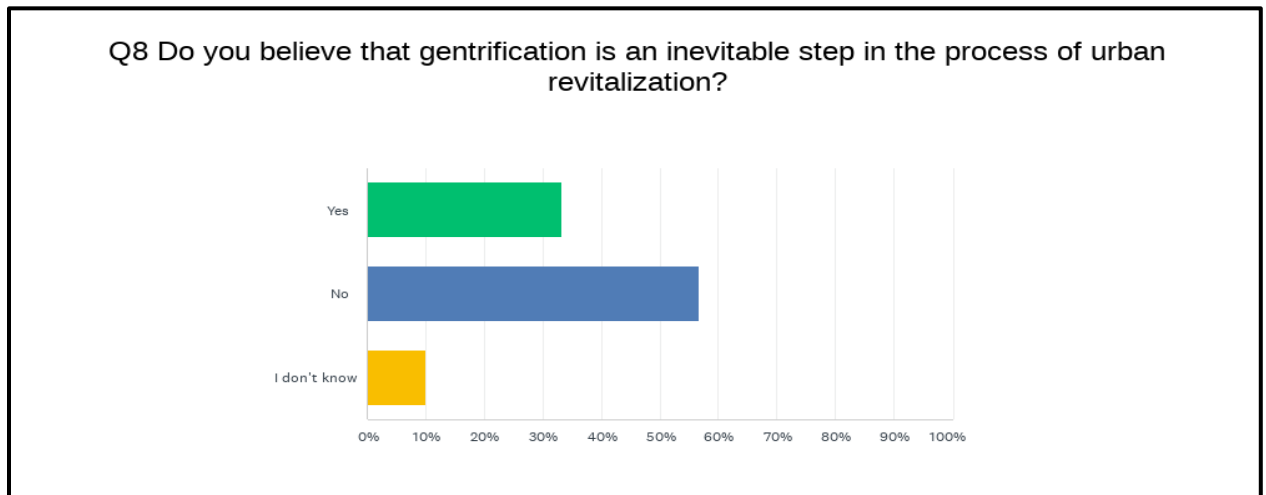
As Table 5 displays, participants by and large felt that the impacts of gentrification were negative or remained neutral on the subject. To fix a problem, you must first see it as a problem, which the participants did.

Table 5: Responses According to Impact of Gentrification



As Table 6 shows, most participants also believe that gentrification is not inevitable. Therefore, they believe we can work towards stopping displacement and other negative impacts of gentrification. Inevitability would have meant that the residents felt that there was nothing that could be done to fix the problem.

Table 6: Responses According to Beliefs about Gentrification



Conclusion

Outcomes, Suggestions, and Solutions from the Community Meeting in Schenectady:

1. Participants felt that there should be an increase in the amount of money available for low-income housing. There needs to be some investigation at the local, county, and state levels regarding this point. Once the amount allotted is determined, we need to demand that those funds trickle down to those in need through the proper organizations and programs.
2. It is also important to increase the community's input in the changes that are happening in the city. It is important to attend local, county, and state meetings to stay informed and then inform the community.
3. It would be helpful if the churches hosted programs that educate people about homeownership. These programs would also need to educate people about credit and money management. Churches can also host forums on gentrification issues.
4. Programs and information should be widespread. The information needs to be shared in flyers and on social media platforms. Community forums can also be informative. Additionally, we can host free events like community cookouts and we can share the information there.
5. Faith-based leaders should have a coalition among themselves to show their united efforts to the community. We need faith leaders on the front line. We also need faith-based leaders to advocate for individuals that are being displaced.
6. We can also connect residents to organizations in the city that are already offering programs. Organizations such as Schenectady Community Action Programs (SCAP) and other agencies that offer homebuying programs. We also need to find out if there are any rent-to-own programs in the city or county. Our target audience should be the African American community since they are among the most disenfranchised in the city of Schenectady.
7. We want to form an Affordable Housing Coalition.
8. It would be helpful to study and meet with the Metropolitan Baptist Church of Albany. They have been able to establish some programs in a neighboring city that have been able to help lessen the displacement of longtime residents.
9. Pastors are still a voice of reason and consciousness. We need them to clarify foundational faith-based values for programming and be the public face and voice for the people in the community.

Outcomes, Suggestions, and Solutions for the Community Meeting in Asbury Park:

1. There needs to be some outreach done to eradicate misinformation. Sometimes residents are misinformed on issues and encouraged to vote against their best interests.
2. We can organize residents to hold elected officials and policy makers accountable. Sometimes policies are put in place but not carried out.
3. Pastors can organize from inside the churches and speak up from the pulpit. We need to empower residents to speak up also. Faith leaders can also exercise their agency to speak to politicians and power brokers and ask them to consider all residents in the city including low-income residents.
4. Support the city in partnering with the housing authority for low income and affordable housing units.
5. It may also be advantageous to purchase property as a collective.

This community collectively experienced the demolition of a large low-income residential building that displaced hundreds of residents. For this reason, they wanted to focus their efforts on preventing that from happening again. The Boston Way Village was demolished in 2013. Residents were given Section 8 vouchers and told they could relocate anywhere in the country. They were also told that they would be the first in line to move back into the newly renovated apartments once they were done. The new complex was opened in 2019, six years later. The “affordable housing” is not that affordable and to no one’s surprise, most of the residents did not return. The city has proposed plans for the Lincoln Village Apartments and residents are concerned that the outcomes from the Boston Way Village may happen again.

6. Defend Lincoln Village from being demolished. We need to plan a protest.

7. We should also have community meetings specifically for the residents of Lincoln Village to inform them of what is happening. We need to organize them to speak up for themselves.
8. There are four churches located within a four-block radius of Lincoln Village. We can reach out to the pastors and inform them of what is going on. Ask them to share the information with their parishioners and extend an invitation to meetings.
9. We need to ensure that the tenants know their rights and encourage them to really consider the voucher options that may be offered to them. We can distribute postcards informing them of any new developments. We also need to inform them of when there is an agenda item before the city council pertaining to their residence.
10. We need to continue to present policies to the city that will protect the residents of Lincoln Village and advocate to prevent their displacement.

As cities are rapidly changing around us, we, the Church, must invite ourselves to the table where discussions are happening about the redevelopment occurring in our communities. The community members still believe in the clergy's ability to influence government and stakeholders. They rely on us to be their voice when they do not know what to say. When it comes to gentrification and redevelopment, it is our responsibility to learn the inner workings of these phenomena. We must become students of urban development and listen to the activists who have been advocating for fair housing. Clergy sometimes have nothing to say on the subject because we have not educated ourselves on the issues. Yet, our churches suffer the consequences of gentrification and displacement when our members leave the area because it is no longer affordable for the working class.

This is the case with the Mother Church of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Denomination. Mother A.M.E. Zion Church was initially located in Seneca Village in the early nineteenth century. The church was displaced with its parishioners when the area was taken by eminent domain. Mother A.M.E. Zion Church was forced to move uptown

to Harlem and now that Harlem is experiencing gentrification, the church is facing displacement again. An article in the New York Times states that the “aging congregation base, deferred maintenance, insufficient funding and a rapidly gentrifying Harlem threaten to capsize the church in the face of mounting financial distress.”³ The pastor, Malcom Byrd, goes as far as to say, “Mother Zion lives week to week like the people on the block.”⁴ It would be tragic if Mother Zion were displaced yet again. In the case of Seneca Village, the displacement did not occur because the residents could no longer afford to live in the village; however, that is the case presently in Harlem. The New York Times article also said this about Mother A.M.E. Zion Church: “much of its congregation base, New York’s working-class African American community, can no longer afford the neighborhood.”⁵ Sadly, this may soon be the situation in Schenectady, New York if clergy, government officials, and community leaders do not step in and stand up for the low-income residents. The time is now to advocate for affordable and adequate housing. If we do not start to advocate now, people will be displaced in droves. We find that such was the case in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

This is the reason that attendees at the meeting I facilitated in Asbury Park were so focused on the Lincoln Village Apartments. Gentrification has been occurring for years in Asbury Park. In fact, there is an entire book devoted to the subject referenced in my research titled *Gentrification Down the Shore* by Molly Vollman Makris and Mary

³ Mia Jackson, “Once a Force in Harlem, the Oldest Black Church in New York Hangs On,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/realestate/mother-ame-zion-church-harlem-nyc.html>.

⁴ Jackson, “Once a Force in Harlem.”

⁵ Jackson, “Once a Force in Harlem.”

Gatta.⁶ The attendees at the meeting did not only know the history of the city, but they had also experienced it firsthand. It was beneficial that clergy and members of the Asbury Park Housing Coalition were in attendance at the meeting. Clergy were able to learn from these local advocates, and the advocates saw that the local clerics were being attentive to the needs of the community.

As noted in this research project, many of the actions that came out of the community meeting were centered around Lincoln Village. The consensus of the room was that people did not want to see residents displaced by the proposed redevelopment project. This was a warranted concern because that is what happened in the recent past. At the time of the meeting, there were plans for new building complexes that the City of Asbury Park and the Asbury Park Housing Authority would carry out together. These were buildings that would replace the Lincoln Village apartments. However, the question that lingered in the minds of fair housing activists was how to prevent Lincoln Village tenants from being displaced like the Boston Way Village tenants. “The housing authority operates facilities that comprise more than 830 housing units, including Asbury Park Village, Lincoln Village, Washington Village, Boston Way Village, Comstock Court, Lumley Homes and Robinson Towers.”⁷ The Asbury Park Press reported in June of 2023 that the city and housing authority had made plans to build the new units without displacing residents. This is no doubt a result of years of arduous work from

⁶ Molly Vollman Makris, and Mary Gatta, *Gentrification down the Shore* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

⁷ “Asbury Park Will Demolish Lincoln Village, Use ‘Home Plate’ to Double Number of Apartments,” n.d. Asbury Park Press, accessed June 27, 2023, <https://www.app.com/story/news/local/redevelopment/2023/06/26/affordable-housing-nj-asbury-park-lincoln-village-vacant-lot/70111963007/#:~:text=In%20a%20deal%20with%20the>.

the Asbury Park Affordable Housing Coalition. The article reports that “Construction of Phase I is expected to take 16 months and be completed in September 2025. Full occupancy for Phase I, which includes the existing residents, is expected by the beginning of 2026. Demolitions and the construction of Phase II is expected to take 16 months, beginning in December 2025, and finishing by late March 2026. Final occupancy of the New Lincoln Village is expected by July 24, 2027.”⁸ Considering the timeline and work that lies ahead, clergy in Asbury Park need to join the labor that housing advocates are already doing. At minimum, they can offer their church buildings to be used for meeting space. The Lincoln Village Apartments are within a two-block radius of five churches. These churches will be impacted by the new development as have so many churches throughout the nation.

Whether in Schenectady, Asbury Park, Brooklyn, Harlem, or San Francisco, faith communities in the middle of gentrified communities need to step in before they are stepped on. I have concluded that, moving forward, it is my objective to connect housing activists and local faith leaders. The conversation and work need to be ongoing. As a pastor I will be proactive in approaching housing activists and helping to create an affordable housing coalition in Schenectady. I must also do my best to prepare the members of my church for the change coming to the community and empower them to advocate for themselves to the best of their ability. However, when they cannot advocate for themselves, I will speak up for them, God being my help.

⁸ “Asbury Park.”

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